

**Pittsylvania
County**

Should prison inmates count?

Proposal would
exclude prisoners
from redistricting

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A Virginia lawmaker plans to re-introduce a bill that could allow Pittsylvania County to avoid counting its prison population during the redistricting process.

Delegate Riley Ingram, R-Hopewell, pre-filed House Bill 13 early this month. He plans to bring it back to the General Assembly in 2012 after it passed the House of Delegates 99-0 during the last session but died in a Senate committee.

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Prison

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Under current state law, a city, county or town containing a state adult correctional facility whose population exceeds 12 percent of the locality's total population can leave those prisoners out of the redistricting process — the drawing of new legislative districts.

Ingram wants to add language that would also

include federal and regional adult correctional facilities.

The bill would also allow localities to exclude inmates if they exceed 12 percent of an election district's population within a county, town or city.

"It's been a concern for some time," Ingram said Thursday.

Green Rock Correctional Center, a state prison located in Pittsylvania County's minority-majority Banister District, has a capacity of slightly more

than 1,000 prisoners, said County Administrator Dan Sleeper. The Banister District's population is about 9,000.

Though the bill would not help Pittsylvania regarding the 2010 U.S. Census, it could possibly benefit the county in the 2020 Census, Sleeper said. The county had to include Green Rock's population in its redistricting from last year's count, which skewed the results because convicted felons cannot vote, Sleeper said.

"You want a fair representation of voters in your district," Sleeper said.

Peter Wagner, executive director of the Prison Policy Initiative in Easthampton, Mass., said Ingram's bill would more than double the number of rural counties eligible to leave out prison populations from their districts. The current law gives voters in certain districts more power than they should have, Wagner said.

"It gives unearned extra influence to residents that

live next to the prison to the detriment of residents in every other district," Wagner said.

The Prison Policy Initiative focuses on how prisons affect society.

Delegate Donald Merricks, R-Pittsylvania County, said he would probably support Ingram's bill if it comes to a vote in the House.

"I don't know why you'd include them [prisoners], anyway," Merricks said.

Crane reports for the Danville Register & Bee.