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## Inmate population complicates Henry Co. Council

Including the inmates  
in redistricting  
efforts could result  
in disproportionate  
representation in  
Council District 4

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**NEW CASTLE** — Prairie Township in Henry County has experienced a population explosion since the 2000 Census, and authorities there must decide how to balance government representation accordingly.

The problem is that the population growth happened behind concrete walls and razor wire among men who are legally prevented from voting.

Since the New Castle Correctional Facility opened in 2002, it has brought around 2,500 new residents to Henry County and Prairie Township. The township's population expanded from 3,317 in 2000 to 5,517 in 2010, and the prisoners, identified as local residents under the Census, accounted for all of that growth.

"With the injection of prisoners into Prairie Township, that does distort things," said Henry County Councilman Nate LaMar, who represents Prairie and seven other townships in District 4.

Government watchdogs argue that prisoners should not be counted in the redistricting of political boundary lines. Attorney Peter Wagner, executive director of the nonprofit Prison Policy Initiative in Massachusetts, said democracy suffers when prisoners are counted in redistricting, because it artificially inflates political power in one district while diluting it elsewhere.

Wagner calls this disproportionate representation "prison-based gerrymandering," though he pointed out it is as often the result of inattention as it is trickery.

In an extreme example, in Anamosa, Iowa, one city council ward had 1,321 prisoners and 58 actual constituents. Those 58 constituents, therefore, held 25 times the political influence of constituents in the other three wards.

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# Inmates

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The situation is not quite as dramatic in Henry County.

If prisoners are included in redistricting efforts, about 20 percent of Lamar's constituency would be behind bars.

"Are there districts that are 80, 90, 95 percent? Yes. But 20 percent is still a big deal," Wagner said.

As of last week, the Henry County commissioners, who are responsible for county council redistricting, had not decided whether to count the prisoners when they draw new boundary lines.

"It's something we would have to look at," Commissioner Bill Cronk said. "I'd have to talk to some other people and other counties and even the secretary of state."

With the nationwide growth in prisons and

prison populations, Henry County has company in its redistricting conundrum. According to Wagner, at least 118 communities have new or substantially increased prisons since the 2000 Census.

Indiana's prison communities have traditionally included the inmates in their redistricting. Sullivan County, for example, has a county council district with 39 percent of its population in the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility. Perry County has a county council district with 27 percent of its population behind the bars of Branchville Correctional Facility.

LaMar speculated the commissioners would move Jefferson Township into neighboring District 3 to counterbalance the population growth in District 4.

"It would make it easier for me to campaign in a smaller district," LaMar

said. "But I certainly regret losing any of my district."

LaMar said he believed the inmates legally had to be included in redistricting efforts, and worried that not including the inmates might constitute a civil rights violation.

But according to Wagner, Delaware, Maryland and New York have all passed legislation putting procedures in place to count inmates at their home addresses for state and local redistricting purposes. Furthermore, 100 local governments have implemented solutions on their own, he said.

"It's absolutely up to the discretion of local government," he said.

Redistricting in Henry

County government would have to be finished by 2014, when the next elections are for council districts.

District 2 council member Robin Reno-Fleming told The Star Press she hadn't thought about whether prisoners should be counted in redistricting efforts and hadn't formed an opinion yet. Efforts to reach Steven Dugger, District 3, and Richard Bouslog, District 1, were unsuccessful.

The prison situation does not affect Henry County commissioners because they represent a geographic area, not based on population, and are elected at large.

Contact reporter Nick Werner at 213-5832.