



WEDNESDAY
JUNE 1, 2011

The Republican.

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75 cents

Panel hears redistricting ideas

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GREENFIELD - The Special Joint Committee on Redistricting Tuesday heard a strong defense of maintaining two Western Massachusetts congressional districts, along with some testimony on how to apportion any such cuts fairly.

The loss of one Massachusetts congressional seat has been mandated based on 2010 census figures showing slow population growth in the com-

WMass fights to retain seats

monwealth. The committee has been tasked with redrawing the district lines to see where the cut will take place.

Some of those speaking Tuesday at Greenfield Community College were resisting the entire notion of redistricting the two Western Massachusetts seats presently occupied by Rep. Richard Neal, D-Springfield, and Rep.

John Olver, D-Amherst, while others were hoping to determine how a redistricting plan could be accomplished with minimal impact to the region.

Massachusetts has 10 congressional seats and advocates from the eastern portion of the state, like the Boston-based group Fair Districts Mass., are pushing to elimi-

nate one out west.

Andrea F. Nuciforo, Jr., register of deeds in Berkshire County, took umbrage with any proposal that would eliminate a Western Massachusetts district.

"It is critically important for representation for people in Western Massachusetts to keep two districts," said Nuciforo. "Communities of com-

mon interest should be put together."

"I think the current configuration of the first (district) and the second (district) is true to that unifying principle," he said.

An aide for Olver read written testimony from the congressman.

"It is often necessary to link many smaller communities together to effectively address the challenges they face," Olv-

Please see Congress, Page A2

Congress: WMass seats defended

Continued from Page A1

er wrote to defend maintaining his district.

Keith C. McCormick, vice chair of the Greenfield School Committee, suggested drawing the lines around existing school districts because those are often inherent combinations of communities of interest.

"I'm not trying to recommend a particular layout so much as a way of doing the layout," said McCormick, who presented several illustrations of what his plan might look like in action.

"It's a process that, while it may not apply as well in the eastern part of the state ... this is something that can work in a lot of different places."

Factors in redistricting include the populations, the traditional lines and the provisions of the Vot-

ing Rights Act of 1965, which protects against disenfranchisement of minority populations.

Another consideration is keeping communities of interest in the same district. Those are towns and cities that have similar needs and concerns, such as the large number of rural communities in Franklin or Berkshire counties.

Peter Wagner, executive director of the Prison Policy Initiative, said prisoners are counted in the census as residents of a correctional facility, rather than their hometowns. He called drawing the lines accordingly "prison-based gerrymandering."

The law in Massachusetts is that prisoners are residents of their hometowns and the census data are therefore flawed, he said.

He suggested "overpopulating" districts that have large correctional facilities because a higher

count would more accurately reflect the number of legal residents who will receive representation. Prisoners in Massachusetts cannot vote.

"We get the numbers the way the federal government gives them to us and we have to work with them," said Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington.

Rep. Michael J. Moran, D-Brighton, the house chair of the committee, said Wagner's suggestion could lead to lawsuits and confusion about what groups can be counted this way, such as college and university students.

Several people who testified also spoke in support of keeping the fifth district because, as a woman, Rep. Niki Tsongas brings needed diversity to congress, in addition to her legislative accomplishments.

Olver has constituents in Berk-

shire, Franklin, Hampshire, Hampden, Worcester and Middlesex counties. Neal represents constituents in Hampshire, Hampden, Norfolk and Worcester counties. There are eight congressional districts in Worcester County and to the east.

Some analysts, like those at the Boston Globe, say Olver's seat is most in danger because of the 74-year-old's age and the slow population growth in his district, but that his political clout could help him keep his job.

The committee is also charged with drawing new lines for state representative, state senator and governor's council districts.

Another public hearing is scheduled for Saturday, June 11, at 10 a.m. at City Hall in Pittsfield. The public can also submit written testimony through the committee's website at www.malegislature.gov/District.