

Group wants Census to bar inmates

By Deborah Gates
Staff Writer

PRINCESS ANNE — A citizens task force advocating the placement of African-Americans in professional jobs and on boards in county government wants Somerset County Commissioners to push for the exclusion of the nonvoting inmate population at Eastern Correctional Institution in a count that determines voting districts.

The Somerset County Task Force on Diversity lists electoral reform among 10 recommendations unveiled last week as proposed steps to achieve board representation and a work force in county government reflective of the county population that is about 42 percent African-American and 2 percent Hispanic.

In Somerset County, an African-American has never been elected to the five-member Somerset County Commissioners, not even in the so-called minority voting District 1 that includes ECI. Eliminating the estimated 3,000 inmates at ECI from the next redistricting process could serve to increase opportunities for minority candidates for some public offices — incentive for county-elected officials to seek the attorney general's opinion on the measure, Deborah Jeon, legal director at ACLU of Maryland, said last week.

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THE DAILY TIMES

Monday, November 23, 2009

[delmarvanow.com]

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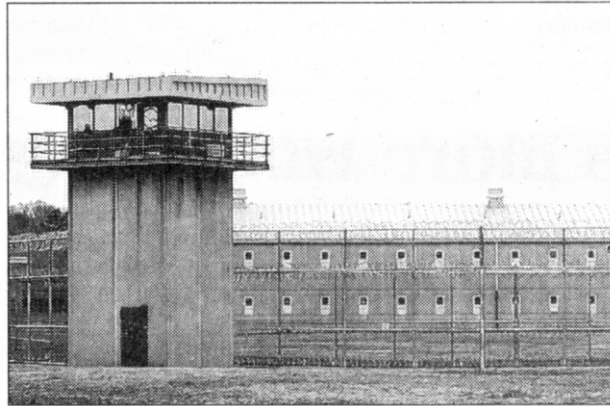
Inmates

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"Is it a truer reflection of the voting population when (redistricting) is not represented among inmates at the state prison in Westover?" Jeon said. In June, the ACLU of Maryland worked with the Somerset County NAACP branch to organize the county diversity task force. "Somerset County in the past has asked for opinions from the attorney general regarding redistricting. The issue has come up about the prison in Somerset."

At last week's task force meeting, Kirkland Hall, president of the Somerset NAACP, said electoral reform would "make the county election system fairer, more balanced and inclusive."

The relationship between prison populations and redistricting is



Matthew S. Gunby file photo

One of the towers is shown at Eastern Correctional Institution. A citizens task force wants to exclude ECI inmates from the Census, which determines voting districts.

a topic also being discussed in other communities, Jeon said, adding that state legislators would have the final say. A spokesman at the Maryland Board of Elections also said recently that discussions on the demographic impacts on voting district boundary lines tend to surface during the season of Census-taking, which comes around

every 10 years, next in 2010.

At ECI, the state's largest prison, inmates account for at least two-thirds of the total District 1 population, yet they have no electoral voice, Jeon said.

"That's a huge population block that's ineligible to vote; but it is counted by the Census," Jeon observed.

Somerset County

moved to create a district voting system as part of a Voting Rights Act lawsuit settlement in 1986. The process also created the so-called minority District 1 in which African-Americans were a majority and where a significantly larger percentage of 18-year-olds and older were eligible to vote, she said.

"But the settlement predated ECI, which opened in 1989," Jeon said. "The prison was included in the 1990 (redistricting) count, but the 'minority district' is dominated by a nonvoting population."

An estimated 1,300-bed privately operated prison for federal inmates proposed south of Princess Anne near ECI, if built, would not be counted until the 2020 Census, and therefore excluded from any measures applicable to the outcome of the 2010 Census, Jeon said.