

OBSERVER-DISPATCH

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OUR VIEW

Don't count prisoners with voters

AT ISSUE: Redraw districts following 2010 Census to reflect true constituency

Counting prisoners as residents of a specific area for census records is one thing. But figuring those prisoners into the mix when voter representation is determined is absurd, and that needs to change.

In January, it was reported that the 6,000-plus prison inmates at Oneida County's four prisons are factored into population totals for county legislative districts in Marcy and Rome. Meanwhile, in the city of Rome, nearly half the people in the Second Ward are prisoners. That means a non-prisoner in the Second Ward has twice the clout on the Common Council over a resident in another part of the city. That's wrong.

While prisoners are counted for census purposes – they do need some local services, particularly medical care – they contribute nothing to the community that would in any way justify them being part of the constituency represented by local government. They don't pay local property taxes, drive on our highways, vote, attend municipal meetings or otherwise become enmeshed in local affairs. Most aren't even from our region.

Peter Wagner, executive director of the nonprofit Prison Policy Initiative, says New York state allows its 62 counties to discount prisoners when determining the population base on which legislative representation is based. Thirteen counties do that, but Oneida County is not among them. In the wake of the skewed representation, county officials say they may consider excluding prisoners as they prepare to update the

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county's 29 legislative districts. They should.

And so should Rome. Mayor James Brown agrees that the current setup doesn't create fair and equal representation, and says he'll consider it. Brown also thinks the approach should be consistent throughout municipalities in New York state.

He's right. Wagner says there are two bills pending in the state Assembly and Senate that would require the state to distribute adjusted counts for county use in redistricting. It would make sense for Sen. Joseph Griffo, R-Rome, and Assemblywoman RoAnn Destito, D-Rome, to get behind such legislation.

If, however, the state fails to act in timely fashion – that's been known to happen in Albany – area localities affected by the lopsided numbers should make plans now to redraw lines and exclude prisoners in the redistricting immediately following the 2010 Census. It's only fair.

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