Prison populations distort districting

Va. urged to change how inmates figure into drawing of lines

BY FRANK GREEN
Times-Dispatch Staff Writer

Almost half of Powhatan County Supervisor Carson Tucker’s constituents are pretty rough actors, but they don’t gripe about real estate taxes and they never vote against him.

Three state prisons holding more than 2,000 non-voting felons sit in Tucker’s Board of Supervisors district.

Because the U.S. Census Bureau counts them as county residents, census-based redistricting in 2001 left each of Tucker’s 5th District voters with a lot more clout than his or her counterparts in the county’s four other districts.

Tucker, however, believes the whole county — not just his district — benefits from the inmates because they give Powhatan an edge over other counties when it comes to divvying up state and federal aid.

“Every single resident of districts 1, 2, 3, and 4 in Powhatan County have their votes on county issues diluted because District 5 is being padded with prisoners.”

PETER WAGNER
Prison Policy Initiative

“It’s a balancing act to us and we are satisfied,” he said.

In recent decades, the explosive growth of prisons in Virginia and across the country in sparsely populated rural areas has led to distortions in districting that challenge the principle of one-person, one-vote.

With the 2010 census numbers becoming available in February and redistricting for 2011 about to

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