

Redistricting committee supports minority districts



Mass VOTE Co-director Cheryl Crawford reads demands drawn up by a statewide coalition of 40 organizations calling for the creation of more majority-minority voting districts in Massachusetts during a press conference at the Statehouse. (Yawu Miller photo)

Yawu Miller

Ten years ago when black, Latino and Asian activists sought input on the Legislature's redistricting process, they were shut out, unable to even secure a meeting with legislative leadership.

Last week, as many of the same advocates held a press conference announcing their demands for new majority-minority districts, House

Redistricting Committee Chairman Mark Moran was standing with them.

"We're committed to an open and transparent process," Moran told reporters who gathered in front of the Statehouse.

That process included 12 meetings across the state, an interactive website that shares Census data and downloadable software that let community groups draw their

own maps.

"In the end, I think, we had a process second to none," Moran said. "I believe when the maps are made public those organizations will see their fingerprints on it."

A coalition of 40 community organizations from across the state is calling for the creation of at least six new Legislative districts with majority-minority voting-age populations, one new

Senate district and one new congressional district.

"The 2010 Census is a great opportunity to right the wrongs of the past and to increase the number of districts representing people of color," said Sean Daughtry, chairman of the NAACP New England Area Conference.

Moran said he and his Senate counterpart on the Redistricting Committee, Stanley Rosenberg, support the group's call for more minority representation.

"The reason I'm here today is because I'm supporting everything these groups are calling for," he said.

The Legislature must redraw the lines of House and Senate districts every 10 years to reflect changes in population. According to state law, each district must have an equal share of the state's population to ensure that each person's vote counts equally. Because the state's population shifts from region to region, district lines must change.

Population changes at the national level have also necessitated changes in the state's Congressional districts. Because the population in Massachusetts has not grown as quickly as that in other regions of the U.S., the state will lose one congressional district and those lines must be redrawn, as well.

Ten years ago, civil rights groups and community organizations challenged the Legislature's redistricting plan, arguing that the districts they drew diluted minority voting strength. This year, Mass VOTE and the Latino political organization ¿Oiste? are determined to work with the Redistricting Committee to make sure districts are redrawn more fairly without litigation.

The coalition is calling for new majority-minority districts in

Boston, Brockton, Lowell, Springfield and Holyoke. As it is now, more than 50 percent of the residents of Boston are people of color, but just six of the 21 House seats in Boston are held by people of color.

Drawing Democracy, a coalition of nonprofit foundations and individual charitable donors, has worked with community-based organization in these cities, providing them with resources that have allowed them to draw maps that would maximize the voting power of their communities.

In all, 40 groups signed on to the unity statement drafted by Mass VOTE, the Latino political organization ¿Oiste? and the NAACP.

Additionally, an organization called the Massachusetts Black Empowerment Coalition is calling for additional house and senate seats. Moran says the Redistricting Committee has received more than 15 maps from groups across the state.

In addition to calls for more majority-minority districts, members of the coalition are calling on the Redistricting Committee to not count prison populations in the drawing of districts, a practice they say artificially inflates the voting clout of suburban and rural districts that have prisons.

Moran noted that the U.S. Census counts prisoners in the census tracts where they're incarcerated. But he added that, although the Legislature is required to draw districts that are of equal size, they have leeway to deviate from that standard by up to five percent.

"Where there is a prison, you would keep it on the negative side and where there is not, you would keep it on the positive side," Moran said.

Our testimony suggested this interim solution!