



## Keeping prison, losing residents?

by Laura Lee Costello

Tuesday  
March 30, 2010

Mar 19, 2010 | 171 views | 0 | 4 | |

The arrival of a new decade and a new Census count may bring about a reduction in Cranston's population if some Rhode Island legislators have their way. At a House Judiciary Committee hearing on Tuesday, March 9, lawmakers considered legislation that would change the way prisoners are counted for political districting purposes.

Incarcerated individuals at the ACI are currently counted as residents of Cranston. Proponents of the bill contend that this process artificially adds people to Rhode Island House Districts 15 and 16 and Senate District 27. The proposed legislation would mandate that these individuals be counted as residents of the town or city of their last known address, prior to being incarcerated.

Rep. Joe Almeida, sponsor of the House version of the bill, said the issue is one of fairness.

"This problem has been going on for years – the population in the ACI is not being counted correctly, according to the law," he said. "According to Rhode Island General Law they should be counted by where their last domicile was. This legislation just enforces the law."

Allocating residents of the ACI (whose population averages between 2,500 and 3,000 people) to their previous residences would be relevant when the General Assembly begins redistricting in 2011, based on the 2010 Census. Because House districts 15 and 16 and Senate district 27 would be losing some of their population they may have to be redrawn.

Rep. Nick Mattiello, who represents District 15, is unfazed by the proposal.

"It's a non-issue for me personally and I don't think it will negatively affect Cranston," he said. "I'm happy with the makeup of my district now, and I would be happy if they reapportioned it too. I'd rather have more voting households."

Bruce Reilly a committee organizer for Direction Action for Rights and Equality said the redistricting would probably not have an impact on elections, but could affect the allocation of federal and state funds.

"It's a political power situation," he said, "and people are power. Revising residency data could provide a more equitable distribution of resources amongst cities and towns. Now Cranston has several thousand extra residents who can't vote and aren't members of the community in any real way."

A fiscal impact statement has not yet been released as to how much money that could amount to. Although he is uncertain regarding specific amounts or subsidies, Almeida agrees that counting prisoners in their prior residences may lead to economic benefits.

"These folks come from districts around the state and will be returning to them upon their release. Counting them correctly is a way to get more federal dollars for things like education in their communities," he said.

Though the proposed legislation would require the use of the revised residency data in the creation of house and senate districts as well as county or municipal legislative body districts, it makes no allowances for long-term or life-sentences.

Mayor Allan W. Fung said he was concerned that Almeida's bill may take much-needed state and federal resources away from Cranston.

"Those that are incarcerated at the ACI, particularly those that are here for a long sentence, have an impact on the services that we provide. Our police, fire and rescue make multiple runs to the prison. Under the proposal, none of these people would be counted for Cranston unless they lived here previously," he said.

"There is nothing to even show that a person who finishes his or her sentence returns to their prior address. I cannot support a proposal that may disadvantage Cranston's ability to get sorely needed resources."

Representative Charlene Lima agreed, adding that PILOT money does not cover the lost revenue from having the facilities exempt from property tax as it is. She also questions how it will affect the strength of Cranston's representation at the State House, regardless of the fact her district would remain untouched.

"Cranston would lose a representative and maybe a Senator at the State House. That would hurt Cranston," she said.

In a press release on the subject, she points out, "Cranston's loss would be Providence's gain," in reference to cities such as the capital that stand to benefit the most.

Moreover, Lima questions how any legislator – particularly one from her city – could support the bill without specific details as to what it would do.

"There has been no analysis. I wouldn't support this until I saw the impact on my part of Cranston," she said.

According to Amy Kempe, spokesperson for Gov. Donald Carcieri, the governor's office has not yet taken a position on the proposal.

The house hearing committee took no action on the bill on Tuesday, pending further discussion. A companion bill in the Rhode Island Senate has been sponsored by Harold Metts (District 6). Similar legislation is currently pending in several other states, including Florida, Illinois, Maryland and New York.

**post a comment**

**comments (0)**

**no comments yet**

[help](#)   [about us](#)   [contact us](#)

software copyright © 2008 Matchbin, inc. content copyright © 2008 Warwick Beacon

[read our privacy policy](#)

Warwick Beacon is in Warwick, Rhode Island