

Public Involvement Crucial to Redistricting Process

by Jim Regnier, Jon Bennion, Joe Lamson, Pat Smith, and Linda Vaughey

The process to redraw Montana's legislative districts is underway and there are a number of opportunities for you to get involved. While the new districts will not be in place until the 2014 election, the chance for early public involvement has begun.

Every 10 years, in keeping with our state constitution, a bi-partisan, five-person commission draws new boundaries for the legislative districts. These changes are necessary to keep up with population shifts, maintain minority voting rights, and ensure that we closely adhere to the principle of "one person, one vote."

In the coming months, there are two important opportunities for you to be a part of this redistricting process.

First, your household will soon receive a short, 10-question survey from the U.S. Census Bureau. As required by the U.S. Constitution, the bureau will be taking a count of all the people residing in the United States. The survey is confidential and has been shortened to get only the most basic of information.

This process is crucial for the Districting and Apportionment Commission's work of drawing new legislative district boundaries. The census data is used to develop districts that are "nearly equal in population as is practicable." Your participation in the process will help ensure that your future legislative district is comparable in population to that of the other districts in Montana so that each district has the proper political representation.

Second, the Districting and Apportionment Commission will be conducting a series of hearings around the state to get public input on the criteria that will be used to draw the new districts. These criteria will set the rules the Commission will follow throughout the redistricting process.

The Commission has scheduled four main meetings around the state with video-conference networking set up for other locations. The Commission will hold these meetings on April 8 in Helena with video locations in Great Falls and Havre; April 12 in Missoula with a video location in Kalispell; April 19 in Billings with a video location in Miles City; and a final executive action meeting in Helena on April 27.

Due to budget constraints, we are unable to hold hearings in every area we would like. However, when the Commission proposes legislative maps in 2011-2012, we will hold a series of meetings all around the state to seek public comment on those maps.

If you are unable to attend one of the meetings in April or any later meeting, we hope you will still participate by sending comments by phone, email, regular mail or fax. Contact information, as well as our April public hearing schedule, can be found at www.leg.mt.gov/districting. Or, call 406-444-5367 to find out more.

These opportunities for your input are crucial to the work of the Commission over the next three years. We strongly encourage you to take advantage of them, which will help ensure the Commission has accurate information to redraw the legislative districts.

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