

Local Lawmakers Split on Redistricting Reform

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Hollister - While local Republicans and Democrats alike support changing the way legislative district lines are drawn around the state, they're split down the middle on an initiative on the Nov. 8 ballot that would change how those lines are drawn.

Proposition 77 would amend the state's Constitution to change the redistricting process for the state Senate, Assembly, U.S. House of Representatives and Board of Equalization if passed by the majority of voters in next month's special election.

If passed, Prop. 77 would allow a group of retired judges to choose the way the district lines are drawn. Currently, state legislators adjust the boundaries of districts used to elect public officials every 10 years after the federal census tallies California's population. The primary purpose of redistricting is to establish districts which are "reasonably equal" in population, however proponents of 77 believe the way districts are drawn is rigged to allow incumbents to choose their voter base.

"With reduced competition due to our current gerrymandered maps, there is less accountability from the politicians to the people. With the current method incumbent politicians control the districts and meet behind closed doors to carve up the districts to assure that they are safe," stated Jennifer Zapata, San Benito County Republican Central Committee chairwoman. "Prop. 77 could likely affect San Benito County's placement in an Assembly... or Senate District, but Prop. 77 is not about giving more power to the Democrats or Republicans. It is about assuring more fair elections and making elected officials more accountable to the voters throughout their terms of office."

If Prop. 77 passed, it could have a significant effect on the 12th Senate District in San Benito County, which also includes parts of Monterey, Merced, Stanislaus and Madera counties. State Senator Jeff Denham, R-Merced, hopes voters pass 77 because he believes it would make for more competitive elections and would take the power out of the hands of partisan legislators and put it in the hands of a panel of nonpartisan judges, according to his political adviser, Steve Presson.

Presson also said the way the district lines are currently drawn causes some communities to be placed in districts that aren't suited for them. Before being redistricted in 2001, San Benito County was part of a district that included Monterey, Santa Cruz and parts of Santa Clara counties.

"Senator Denham is honored to represent San Benito County... but too many communities have been gerrymandered and it does not make sense," Presson said. "It's a problem that appears throughout the state."

If Prop. 77 passed and the lines were redrawn before the 2006 state elections, it could change next year's Senate race, which currently pairs Denham against local Assemblyman Simon Salinas, D-Salinas.

While the way the lines might be redrawn is complete speculation, Douglas Johnson, a fellow with the Rose Institute at Claremont McKenna College, said it could take Salinas out of Denham's district and put him in the 15th Senate District, now lead by state Sen. Able Maldonado. Denham would then no longer represent San Benito County, and Salinas would have to go head to head with Maldonado when his term is up in 2008. Johnson said if Prop. 77 passes, modeling done by the Rose Institute, which has been doing redistricting analyses since 1973, suggests the lines would be redrawn to where they were in 2001 - which would place San Benito County in a district with other Central Coast counties such as Santa Cruz, Monterey and parts of Santa Clara County.

"There's no way to be sure," Johnson said. "But it could alter (San Benito County) quite a bit."

But even if Prop. 77 does pass, Presson doesn't believe it would change the 2006 race.

"I think given the court challenges that would come up and the timeline, my sense is that it won't be affected until after the election," he said.

While Salinas is in favor of changing the redistricting laws because he believes smaller constituent bases such as San Benito County can be ignored under the current system, he's opposed to Prop. 77 for a number of reasons.

Because it's being brought up in the middle of the decade, he said there are about 3 million new Californians since the last census who would be ignored. And he's concerned about the group of judges who would decide how the lines would be redrawn.

"The majority of retired judges are mostly white males," he said. "They're not accountable to the voters."

Salinas believes San Benito County should be in a district with other Central Coast counties so legislators can make laws that affect entire regions equally.

"I think it would make sense for our communities because we work regionally," Salinas said.

San Benito County Democratic Central Committee Chairwoman Jeanie Wallace said local democrats haven't officially discussed their

stance on the proposition, but though she personally opposes 77 she agrees the redistricting process needs to be changed.

"I don't believe (Prop. 77) does it in a fair and equitable way," she said. "In this area of the state there are some districts that were drawn to protect incumbents. I do think it needs to be corrected, but I don't think this proposition does that with those kinds of corrections in mind."

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