

County board Dems look for more representation

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Reapportioning for Oakland County commission districts may not have the urgency, bickering and political intrigue that characterizes redistricting in other areas.

But it could end up in court if Democrats come away feeling they have been short-changed again, according to Donald Tucker, the lone Democrat on the five-member county reapportionment committee.

County reapportionment chairman Lynn Allen said the big change in redistricting this time will be reflecting the shift in population. Older communities in the southern part of the county — Birmingham, Beverly Hills, Farmington and others — lost population. Communities like Farmington Hills, Rochester Hills, Troy and Auburn Hills gained population.

Politicians and, to a lesser extent, social scientists across the country focused on reapportionment last week because the confirmed U.S. census figures for 1990 were released Monday.

Those figures — accurate or otherwise — are the basis for reapportionment which involves redrawing political boundaries for the U.S. House of Representatives, state House and Senate districts and county commission districts.

From the time those figures are confirmed, reapportionment committees or commissions at the federal, state and local levels have 60 days in which to redraw political districts.

FOR OAKLAND COUNTY, the process has been relatively smooth. Possibly too smooth as far as Democrats are concerned. Tucker and others say the party has been, well, cheated. "Our (Democratic) representation on the board is not proportionate to the percentage of votes we get in county elections," he said.

Democrats usually get more than 40 percent of the vote cast for county commissioners, he said. Yet they occupy only eight of 27 seats on the county board.

Tucker is hopeful that will change this time. "If not, we're ready to go to court."

His Republican counterpart, however, insists any disproportionate representation on the board is simply a matter of Democrats being the minority party.

"They have all the representation they are entitled to," said James Alexander, a Birmingham attorney who is chairman of the Oakland County Republican Party.

Reapportionment — or redrawing political boundary lines — is a high-stake, pressure-packed, battle at some levels and in some areas. To wit:

- At the congressional level in Michigan, the state's population loss and corresponding reapportionment will eliminate two U.S. congressional districts, cutting the number from 18 to 16.
- That means the state's clout in Washington will be reduced. It also creates the potential for some interesting political matchups — like Democrat Bob Carr running against incumbent Republican Bill Broomfield in Oakland's 18th Congressional District (although most say such a battle is not likely). And Democrat Sander Levin in Oakland's 17th could have the political battle of his life.
- At the state level, Oakland County is likely to get one additional seat in the Michigan House, according to State Rep. Maxine Berman, D-Southfield, who is also chairwoman of the special committee on legislative redistricting.
- Berman and others don't know where that new seat would be located. But her prediction is based on Oakland's population increasing by 71,799 residents over the last decade, from 1,011,793 in 1980, to 1,083,592 in 1990.
- At the municipal level, Pontiac, Detroit and other cities are up in arms about undercounting that will cost them population as well as federal and state aid. Detroit stands to lose more than \$70 million over 10 years if claimed undercounting in the Motor City is not corrected.

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As a matter of fact, it was all sweetness and smiles as Tucker — accompanied by Darlene Berent, executive director of the Oakland Democratic Party — met with other members.

Those other members, in addition to Alexander, are county prosecutor Richard Thompson, county clerk Lynn D. Allen and county treasurer C. Hugh Dohany.

The 25-minute meeting was friendly and "quite cordial," said Allen, committee chairman. Allen and Dohany are old hands at redistricting, having gone through it in 1970 and 1980.

The other three members — all lawyers — are rookies.

Members agreed on administrative procedures, such as a timetable for submitting maps proposing (probably mid August) how the county commission districts should be redrawn.

Then the numbers crunching — and any inflighting — will begin.

The average citizen won't likely notice the impact of redistricting, said commissioner Marilyn E. Gosling, R-Bloomfield Hills. "There could be a lot of screaming... but it will likely come from the county commissioners who are affected by it."

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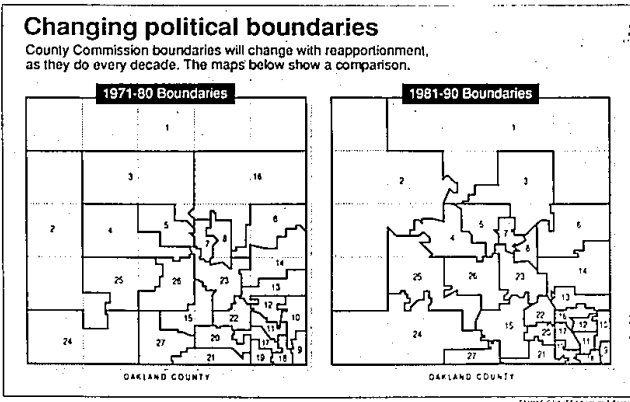
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