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NEWS

Redistricting Alabama: How South Alabama could be split up due to Baldwin County's growth

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U.S. Rep. Jerry Carl, R-Mobile, speaks during a news conference on Monday, March 22, 2021, at the Five Rivers Delta Resource Center in Spanish Fort, Ala. Carl represents Alabama's 1st congressional district which is expected to experience some changes as a result of redistricting. But concerns over splitting Mobile and Baldwin counties have subsided somewhat since Alabama was assured it is not losing a congressional district. (John Sharp/jsharp@al.com).

By **John Sharp**, jsharp@al.com

For decades, Mobile and Baldwin County residents were represented by different congressmen. That ended in the early 1980s, as the two counties were joined together within Alabama's 1st congressional district.

Could another split be in the works? It's a concern, according to some public officials. But thanks to Alabama maintaining its seven congressional seats, the scenario remains less likely than it did earlier in the year when the state's stagnate growth almost led to the loss of one of its congressional districts.

Proposed congressional and legislative maps will be released next month, when the Alabama Legislature is expected to be called into Montgomery for a special session focused on redistricting.

"Mobile and Baldwin counties need to be kept together," said Bradley Byrne, who retired from Congress in January after representing the 1st district for seven years. "They need to be kept whole."

Said State Rep. Adline Clarke, D-Mobile: "I consider Mobile and Baldwin counties one political subdivision and would prefer that these two Gulf Coast counties remain in the same congressional district because government, business and industry in the two counties work well together -- with our congressman -- for the common good of the two counties."

Officials were worried that had Alabama lost a congressional district, Mobile County would merge with a large swath of western Alabama as part of the state's majority-minority congressional district that includes the counties in Alabama's Black Belt.

Baldwin County would have likely merged within the 2nd congressional district that currently includes rural Southeast Alabama, and portions of Montgomery, Autauga and Elmore counties.

The timing would have been problematic. The two counties, and their respective Metropolitan Planning Organizations, remain focused on a new Interstate 10 Mobile River Bridge and Bayway project that will require federal funding and support in Washington, D.C.

"It would be counterproductive on what we need," said state Rep. Matt Simpson, R-Daphne, said about a potential split. "Mobile and Baldwin counties work good together as a region."

Complicating redistricting matters in coastal Alabama is Baldwin County's rapid growth rate – at over 27%, it was Alabama's fastest-growing county since 2010.

The growth is certain to affect how state legislative districts will be redrawn for the next decade. Mobile County had grown at a smaller growth rate, and the city of Mobile experienced a 4.1% decline in population.

Baldwin County's growth has created a different dynamic in coastal Alabama than what existed for most of the last century, when coastal Alabama was represented by two different congressmen. In 1940, for instance, Baldwin County was smaller than rural counties like Barbour and Covington counties. Eighty years later, the county is more than three times larger than Barbour and Covington combined.

"It was a sparsely populated, agricultural county," said Steve Flowers, a former Alabama state lawmaker and political commentator. "Mobile was a metropolitan port district, and they had a kinship to the counties above them.

Flowers said he could see the 1st congressional district becoming a "Mobile and Baldwin counties only" district, which would mean that rural counties – Washington, Escambia, Monroe, and parts of Clarke County – would be absorbed elsewhere.

Alabama's 7th congressional district is the state's only minority-majority district and is represented by Democratic Rep. Terri Sewell, but it has seen a drop of more than 13,000 residents since 2010. The district will have to be drawn to pick up more than 53,000 residents, some of which could come from the northern portions of the 1st congressional district that can afford a slight drop in population.

Mapmakers also have a tricky test to ensure that district maintains its minority-majority status, a requirement of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

"The question now is 'How do you deal with majority-minority districts in the Black Belt and the Montgomery area and how does that interplay affect everything else?'" said state Senator Chris Elliott, R-Daphne. "That will affect congressional district 1, and what it's neighboring districts have to do to accommodate population changes."

Byrne, who made his comments during a public hearing on redistricting in Fairhope on Thursday, said he would hate to see the district lose some of its current geographic boundary, but understands that "there is enough growth in Baldwin" for there to be changes forthcoming.

A spokesman for U.S. Rep. Jerry Carl, R-Mobile, who was sworn in as the district's congressman in January, said the congressman is "engaged with the redistricting process" and has "full confidence the process will be done accurately and fairly."

Redistricting issues

State Senator Vivian Figures, D-Mobile, has been a longtime fixture in the Alabama Legislature. But her Alabama Senate District 33 is 18,508 residents below the ideal population level for an Alabama Senate district, and she's anticipating changes.

"My ultimate goal is to maintain it as a majority-minority district so that voice will be kept (in the Senate)," Figures said.

Figures and other lawmakers, including Elliott, believe that Figures' Senate district could expand further west into Mobile County, or it could shift eastward to including Daphne and Spanish Fort in Baldwin County.

Elliott's Senate District 32 is 33,652 residents above the ideal population level for a Senate district. He anticipates his Senate district shrinking, and the possibility existing for a Mobile County-based state senator's boundaries bleeding into Baldwin County.

The threshold for a House district population is 47,850 residents.

Clarke said by her count, 64 of the House's 105 seats are either over- or under-populated by at least 5%.

"That means the Legislature has a lot of work to do to get House districts within the ideal population range," she said.



State Rep. Matt Simpson, R-Daphne, speaks during a news conference on Monday, September 28, 2020, at the Fairhope satellite courthouse in Fairhope, Ala. (John Sharp/jsharp@al.com).

Simpson's House district includes Daphne and Spanish Fort in the Eastern Shore, but it also includes portions of Mobile County – portions of Chickasaw, Saraland, Creola and Satsuma.

Simpson said the fast growth in his district means he is likely to see his district shrink in size, allowing him to focus on constituents from Baldwin County only.

Simpson's prediction is that Baldwin County, due to its growth, will go from two Alabama House districts represented by Baldwin County residents to four districts represented by four residents living within the county's boundaries.

"There are 66 other counties in the state that would love to have the problems we have in Baldwin County, so part of the benefit is that we will get an increased voice in the legislative process," he said. "I'm happy that Baldwin County has individuals fighting for Baldwin County in that there is a unified voice, so you don't have to deal with multiple county commissions and school boards, and everyone is up there on the same page."

Two House districts in Baldwin County will shrink due to their population growth. They include House District 94 that includes fast-growing Fairhope and surrounding areas currently represented by Republican Rep. Joe Faust, and House District 95 that includes Gulf Shores and Orange Beach and is represented by Republican Rep. Steve McMillan.

State Rep. Alan Barker, R-Brewton, represents a district that includes Escambia County and portions of south Baldwin County. He anticipates that his district could include more areas of Baldwin County.

“I live in Brewton and my district extends to Lillian and Elberta,” said Baker. “My district is almost two hours (to drive across). My cohorts in Montgomery have a hard time conceptualizing that. It’s easier for me to go across Florida than through Alabama to get around in my district.”

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1 of 4

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- I am more motivated to vote to support pro-abortion rights
- I am more motivated to vote to support anti-abortion measures
- I am likely to vote, but it does not impact my motivation
- I am not likely to vote

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