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Louisiana Senate approves map for Congress without new minority district

Questions reveal Senate leaders hired redistricting law firm

EXHIBIT
GX-14

BY: **WESLEY MULLER** - FEBRUARY 8, 2022 7:37 PM

State Sen Sharon Hewitt, R-Slidell, chairs the Senate & Governmental Affairs Committee meeting on Feb. 2, 2022. Her bill to redraw Louisiana's congressional districts was approved Tuesday, Feb. 8, in the state Senate (Greg LaRose/Louisiana Illuminator)

Louisiana Senate Republicans approved a redistricting bill Tuesday that proposes new U.S. House boundaries that maintain the status quo of five majority-White and one majority-Black district in Louisiana, despite new Census numbers that show Black residents comprise one-third of the state's population. The map next heads to the House for consideration.

Proposed by Sen. Sharon Hewitt, R-Slidell, the map passed in a party-line vote of 27-12 after fending off a floor amendment from Sen. Cleo Fields, D-Baton Rouge, who has led Senate Democrats in attempts to give Black residents a share of congressional districts equal to their population proportion.

Hewitt's map maintains a single majority-Black stronghold in District 2, which includes the Black communities of New Orleans, Baton Rouge and those along the Mississippi River between the two cities.

Fields' amendment was a last-ditch attempt for a second majority-minority district after Republicans blocked every map Democrats proposed in committee. Repeating an argument she made in committee debates, Hewitt said a second majority-minority district, which proposals estimated would have about a 54% share of Black voters, would not have the numbers to elect a candidate of their choice, though Hewitt has not provided data to backup that claim.

"You could put the current minority district in jeopardy and wind up with no minority district," Hewitt said.

When asked during Tuesday's floor debate if she tried to draw a second majority-minority district, Hewitt said "she looked at that" but decided she couldn't draw a "performing" one that would result in electing a minority representative.

Sen. Karen Carter Peterson, D-New Orleans, pressed Hewitt on the law firm the Legislature hired to assist with redistricting and whether it gave assurances Hewitt's map would meet Voting Rights Act standards. Hewitt initially resisted answering but ultimately disclosed the lawyer's name, Kate McKnight with BakerHostetler.

Continuing the scrutiny, Peterson asked why she and other senators, such as Fields who drew multiple maps for different elected bodies, did not have access to the lawyer. Hewitt deferred on this and other questions to Senate President Page Cortez, R-Lafayette, who she said was responsible for the contract with BakerHostetler.

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After the vote on Hewitt's bill, Cortez said he and House Speaker Clay Schexnayder, R-Gonzales, contracted with the law firm for its expertise in election law. He added that no public money has been paid to the firm, and that they were hired only for litigation purposes.

Sen. Katrina Jackson, D-Monroe, questioned Hewitt's claims that districts with Black voter share in the low 50th percentile range struggle to elect candidates of choice. Hewitt said experts told her a racially-polarized voting analysis to predict such a trend cannot be conducted because there is "too much noise in the data" available.

"No one has had the confidence to predict with some certainty any of the trends," Hewitt said.

Jackson then asked Hewitt who provided the data insight that led to her conclude that two Black districts couldn't elect a candidate of their choice. Hewitt said BakerHostetler was consulted but did not provide a completed report to reach her conclusion. Pressed further, she said the law firm hired a consultant from Stanford University whose name she could not recall.

Jackson requested that Hewitt provide that consultant's name to the Senate.

Sen. Edward Price, D-Gonzales, asked Hewitt to defer her bill until a public records request could obtain the information Democratic senators were seeking on the law firm, but Cortez instead ended the debate so a vote on Hewitt's proposal could move forward.

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Wes Muller traces his journalism roots back to 1997 when, at age 13, he built and launched a hyper-local news website for his New Orleans neighborhood. In the years since then, he has freelanced for the Times-Picayune in New Orleans and worked on staff at the Sun Herald in Biloxi, WAFB-9News CBS in Baton Rouge, and the Enterprise-Journal in McComb, Mississippi. He also taught English as an adjunct instructor at Baton Rouge Community College. Much of his journalism has involved reporting on First Amendment issues and coverage of municipal and state government. He has received recognitions including McClatchy's National President's Award, the Associated Press Freedom of Information Award, and the Daniel M. Phillips Freedom of Information Award from the Mississippi Press Association, among others. Muller is a New Orleans native, a Jesuit High School alumnus, a University of New Orleans alumnus and a veteran U.S. Army paratrooper. He lives in Ponchatoula, Louisiana, with his two sons and his wife, who is also a journalist.

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