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Guest column: Legislature sought public input in redistricting, but mostly ignored it

BY STEVEN PROCOPIO AND MELINDA DESLATTE
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State Rep. John Stefanski, R-Crowley, left, speaks with state Sen. Sharon Hewitt, R-Slidell, at the end of the 2021 regula
Rouge. They are leading redistricting efforts in the chambers this year.
STAFF PHOTO BY HILARY SCHEINUK

The Louisiana Legislature's redistricting special session offered mixed results for public transparency and participation, with lawmakers giving citizens widespread access to information but appearing to use few of the outside suggestions to sway map designs.

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Discussion, not to mention litigation, about the maps produced during the session and their implications will continue for months, if not years. While the outcome of that remains unsettled, the process to create the maps is easier to judge.

The districts drawn by the House and Senate, if they aren't overturned by the governor or the courts, will affect elections for the next decade for the U.S. House, state Senate, state House, Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and Public Service Commission. The updated district lines are slated to take effect with the new terms of office for each elected body.

Lawmakers did an admirable job of offering the public an opportunity to understand and comment on the redistricting work ahead of the special session. They held "roadshow" hearings around the state to hear from the public and explain the complicated mapping process. They accepted outside map submissions. And their staff created a comprehensive website with detailed Census data and legal information.

But only a sliver of that spirit of openness carried into the session.

Lawmakers heeded calls from the Public Affairs Research Council of Louisiana to release corresponding maps with each proposed change to district lines, and to give the public at least 24 hours ahead of a vote to review a bill and map when districts were heavily reworked or changed with amendments. In some ways, it was the most transparent redistricting process yet.

Still, the primary deals on most maps were worked out behind the scenes.

The House and Senate disregarded many of the public comments and much of the hours of testimony they received and fell into age-old patterns of protecting incumbent officials, political parties and personal allies.

Put charitably, this was a good session for fans of the status quo.

Lawmakers rejected overwhelming calls from people who attended hearings around the state and at the Louisiana Capitol to expand the number of majority-minority districts across several of the maps. It's not clear the Legislature made any significant changes to district lines, big or small, based on citizen input.

Transparency without responsiveness is more likely to lead to frustration rather than good public policy.

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Unfortunately, legislators were secretive about the use of outside consultants. The Republican legislative leadership only provided information about BakerHostetler, the outside law firm enlisted to help with its redistricting work, and the taxpayer-financed contract after receiving public records requests from the media and public pressure from Democratic lawmakers who weren't aware the outside counsel was hired.

In addition, one of the firm's lawyers was publicly quoted advising officials to avoid putting anything about redistricting in writing, raising further questions about transparency. Caution is understandable when litigation is expected. But preparing your defense should be secondary to conducting public business in an open manner.

And there was no reason for secrecy. Outside experts can be helpful, if not required, when dealing with such a complex process that is certain to wind up in court. Legislators just need to be forthright with the public about their use.

Redistricting is difficult work. Lawmakers couldn't create maps that please everyone. However, an open, transparent process that takes citizen input into account isn't only possible, it should be expected. The Legislature got some things right in the special session but fell short in other critical ways.

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