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Gov. John Bel Edwards says 'fair' congressional maps would include another majority-Black district

EXHIBIT
GX-16

State lawmakers begin circulating petition for February redistricting session

BY BLAKE PATERSON | STAFF WRITER
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Governor John Bel Edwards speaks during a press conference to address the recovery efforts across the state of Louisiana following Hurricane Ida, Tuesday, September 7, 2021, in Baton Rouge, La.

STAFF PHOTO BY HILARY SCHEINUK

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With one-third of Louisiana's population identifying as Black, Gov. John Bel Edwards said Thursday it's only fair that two of the state's six congressional districts include a majority of Black voters, suggesting a veto may be on the table if lawmakers don't agree.

The Republican-dominated Legislature began circulating a petition Thursday to reconvene in Baton Rouge in February for its once-in-a-decade redistricting session to rework the state's political maps around updated census data.

Up until now, the Democratic governor has remained tight-lipped on how he might wield his power during that session, saying only that he would veto maps that suffered from "defects in terms of basic fairness."

But at his end-of-the-year press conference Thursday, Edwards took a step towards defining what that actually means: "Fairness, if it can be done, would be to have two out of the six congressional districts be minority districts."

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That might be easier said than done, the governor cautioned.

"Depending on where those populations are located it can be very difficult, or not, in order to draw those maps that work. But obviously if we want to talk about fairness and making sure that the maps reflect the reality of what the situation is on the ground, that should certainly be our goal," Edwards said.

The petition that began circulating Thursday would call the Legislature into session from Feb. 1 to Feb. 20 to redraw the political maps for seats in the U.S. House, state Senate, state House of Representatives, Board of Elementary & Secondary Education, and Public Service Commission. Lawmakers are also hoping to redraw state Supreme Court districts, which haven't been reworked for nearly 25 years and include wide population disparities.

With majorities in both the House and Senate, GOP lawmakers will lead the effort to redraw the state's political maps, but they lack the numbers to override a gubernatorial veto on their own, giving Edwards and Democratic lawmakers a seat at the table.

The governor didn't say if he would veto a map that doesn't add a second majority-Black district, though it's unlikely Republicans would do it on their own. The

drawing of such a district, if it were approved, would almost certainly force the ouster of a Republican incumbent in Congress.

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House Speaker Clay Schexnayder, a Gonzales Republican who led a failed attempt to override Edwards' veto earlier this year, said the governor's comments don't factor in to his thinking. "What he decides to do is totally on him," Schexnayder said. "We're going to do precisely what the law calls us to do."

On the creation of a second majority-minority district, Schexnayder said "it's all about the numbers," referring to the U.S. Census data. "If the numbers dictate it and show it ... we'll look at it," he said.

The chair of Louisiana's Legislative Black Caucus, state Rep. Ted James, D-Baton Rouge, said lawmakers have a "simple obligation to follow the numbers," and with a third of Louisiana's population identifying as Black, the math is straightforward: "One-third of six is two."

The last time lawmakers drew congressional maps, most of the state's Black voters were packed into the 2nd District, which snakes from New Orleans east to north Baton Rouge along the Mississippi River and is currently held by Congressman Troy Carter, D-New Orleans.

If a second majority-minority district is drawn, Edwards said he didn't believe the state could maintain the current set-up of two north Louisiana-based congressional districts. "It would be a major reworking of the map," he said.

A coalition of major civil rights organizations, led by the NAACP Legal Defense & Education Fund, sent a letter to state lawmakers in October with seven different ideas for how Louisiana could redraw its maps to include a second district where Black people constitute a majority of voters. They targeted the Monroe-based 5th Congressional District, represented by Congresswoman Julia Letlow, R-Start, in their proposals.

Together, the two north Louisiana-based congressional districts would need to expand their boundaries to include nearly 85,000 additional residents to make-up for population loss over the last decade.

Congressman Mike Johnson, who represents the Shreveport-based 4th District, said that because his district includes both Barksdale Air Force Base and Fort Polk, he has an outsized influence when it comes to divvying up federal military spending. "If you make one north Louisiana district, you dilute that power," Johnson said.

Republican state lawmakers from north Louisiana also aren't keen on combining the districts.

"I'm not going to vote for anything that doesn't have two northern Congressional districts," said state Rep. Jack McFarland, a Jonesboro Republican and chair of the House conservative caucus.

"Why are we going after our first Republican female Congresswoman?" McFarland added, speaking of Letlow. "In one breath we're saying we want equity, but at the same way we're saying we want to do away with her district so she can't win again."

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