

2011 Chair Redistricting Commission Chair Testimony before County Council

Madam Chair Turner, Vice Chair Olson and members of the County Council, good afternoon.

The Plan and Report to redistrict the nine council districts of Prince George's County, is one that occurred over many months, beginning in the early spring and concluding with our submission of our Plan and Report on September 1 as required.

I come before you as the soon to be retired Chair of the 2011 County Council Redistricting Commission and while you appointed three members to the Commission – me, Commissioner Tamara Davis Brown and Commissioner David Harrington - the Plan before you is the combined work of the Commissioners and Council and Park and Planning staff who assisted us with our work. In a world where we say “this was collaborative effort”, I can assure you that the records of meetings and hearings will attest to that with this process.

This Plan and the direction we took to arrive at the Plan incorporates what is legally required, what are legally accepted redistricting policy considerations and input from County residents.

We were guided by the Legal Requirements of compactness, contiguity and equal population also known as “one person, one vote”. With adherence to these and the federal guidelines in Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act prohibiting race-based vote dilution, we were instructed and guided by a respected national redistricting expert – Dr. Nathaniel Persily, who is here with us today. Dr. Persily, thank you for your light handedness and your outstanding guidance, and thank you for being here today.

With Legal guidance, the direction of our work began to take shape in our early meetings with Dr. Persily in which he instructed us on the importance and effectiveness of “Policy Considerations” or widely accepted principles that aid in the redistricting process.

As page 4 of our Plan outlines, the Commission made three policy choices:

- 1) Given that there was no legal challenge to the 2001 Plan, we thought it reasonable to start our work using the existing Council Districts;

- 2) We chose the key redistricting principle of minimizing the splits to Census Designated places – a CDP being a closely settled, named unincorporated community that generally contains a mix of residential, commercial and retail areas similar to that found in incorporated places of similar size. CDOPs are widely used in the redistricting process where community unification is highly desirable, and;
- 3) We took a nonpartisan viewpoint in crafting the Plan by voting not to consider incumbency. The Commission did address the issue of precincts recognizing that the County Board of Elections would review the Plan and Report and reorganize voting precincts accordingly and before this Plan takes effect in 2014.

Finally, the Public's Input and participation added enormously to the process, as communities and individuals articulated their interests and concerns, combined with a very specific knowledge and understanding about every aspect of their communities and often illuminating things we could not see in a conference room with a computer, a consultant and the maptitude software.

Transparency and access to this process was my personal goal in seeking to serve on this Commission. It was a goal that was embraced by the other members of the Commission and translated by Council Communications staff via a Communications Strategy designed to educate and increase public awareness and understanding of the redistricting process, and encourage greater citizen and community participation. The strategy provided access to the Commission's regular meeting schedule and Public Hearing schedule, and for those who wanted to magnify their points or who could not attend, remote access for comments was made available through the Redistricting Website.

Prior to creating our first draft plan, the Commission conducted five Public Hearings, on weeknights and weekends and in North, Central and South County.

Before speaking more specifically to the Plan, I would draw your attention to three policy issues raised by the public and which the Commission felt obligated to note under "Other Policy Considerations" on page 8 and 9 of the Plan. They are At-Large Districts, with a recommendation from the public for an at-large configuration, with the rationale that such a structure would improve county representation and that result in greater advocacy for community issues. A legal opinion advised us that creating such a structure was outside of the authority of

this Commission and that it would have to be taken up by the County Council by resolution for a Charter review commission or by the voters via referendum

The second issue is Minority Opportunity Districts, our goal, given the legal guidelines and our own policy considerations, was to create a plan that did not dilute the vote of any racial group. Staying true to our goal of using census designated places as the building blocks of the Plan, the Commission wanted to ensure that it did not deprive any racial or ethnic group of an equal opportunity to elect candidates of its choice. Therefore, we endeavored to roughly replicate the racial composition of the current districts, which have successfully provided equal electoral opportunities for the county's diverse constituencies.

Finally, citizens inquired about the Plan's impact on their precincts and were informed, after consultation with the Board of Elections, that the proposed plan posed not concern for the Board. In fact, the Board advised the Commission that precincts will be reconfigured as necessary and citizens informed of precinct changes after the State Redistricting process and prior to the 2012 Elections.

That brings us to the Plan. From 2000 to 2010, the county population grew by 61,905 to 863,420. With the adjusted prison population added according Maryland legislation, the total population is 865,121. The Commission's target population goal for each District is 95,939.

The policy consideration of minimizing the splits to Census Designated became a key factor in the final Plan we submitted, adding legitimacy to the Plan, keeping the Commission from imposing its opinion of what comprises community and allowing the community's voice to be heard. As you can see on page 5 of the report, the 2001 redistricting plan split 40 out of 82 Census Designated Places. The 40 split designated places resulted in 94 separate split sections of the county. For instance, 27 of the 40 split CDPs were split into 2 sections to create 54 separate sections, 12 CDPs were split into 3 sections creating another 36 sections and 1 CDP was split into 4 sections for a total of 94.

By contrast, The Plan we submitted has 3 Split CDPs that creates 7 split sections.

A narrative for each of the Council Districts is outlined clearly in the Plan and report but the areas I highlighted provide you a framework for understanding how the Commission proceeded and arrived at this work product.

I want to close by introducing Attorney and Prince Georgian Brian Larkin, who shadowed this process as a way of beginning to build capacity in Prince George's County for this important work.

Finally, I want to thank the Council for the opportunity to serve. As you prepare for a Public Hearing on September 27th for this Plan and Report, I hope you will conclude that we did our work thoughtfully and with integrity, and that we gave you the best possible canvas to work from as you go forward.

I can say of my co-commissioners, they are smart and funny and hardworking. They represent the spirit, talent and commitment of every community that thrives because its citizens are engaged and informed. It was my pleasure to serve with them. Again, I want to thank the Council Administrator and the Council and Park and Planning staff.

As you know, the Commission did not have the option of doing nothing. I believe the people of Prince George's County have been well served and I thank them and you for the opportunity to do so.