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Contra Costa prepares to embark on redistricting journey

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen
Contra Costa Times

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Continued population growth in East Contra Costa County and Dougherty Valley will again drive the mandatory decennial redrawing of the county's five supervisorial districts.

Cities within Districts 5 and 3, represented by Federal Glover, of Pittsburg, and Mary Piepho, of Discovery Bay, respectively, have grown disproportionately faster than those of their three colleagues. Five of the six towns with growth rates since 2000 of more than 10 percent are in these two districts.

Every decade, after the release of the decennial census, every public entity governed by elected representatives must redraw their boundaries in order to comply with the constitutional requirement of "one person, one vote."

In California, a new, voter-created independent redistricting commission will draw for the first time the lines for congressional and state legislative seats.

But at the local level, the elected officials still craft their own districts.

It is an inherently political process.

A decade ago, Contra Costa's redistricting initiative devolved into an ugly battle over which supervisor would be forced to absorb portions of East Contra Costa, where rapid growth had outpaced the rest of the county.

Then-Supervisor Donna Gerber lost when her four colleagues divided her political stronghold in Walnut Creek and stretched her district from the San Ramon Valley to Brentwood and Discovery Bay.

Gerber blamed development forces who sought to

reduce her slow-growth influence, an assertion other supervisors rejected.

Fast-forward to today when the economy has pushed fights over where and how to grow off the front pages. Nonetheless, East County growth has continued the past decade, albeit at a slower pace.

Projects approved in the 1980s and 1990s are largely on the suburban fringe, where cheaper, agricultural land attracted developers. Brentwood grew 125 percent since 2000, followed by San Ramon at 45 percent, a figure driven chiefly by Dougherty Valley construction.

As a result, Glover and Piepho's districts will likely shrink in physical size while the other three supervisors are expected to take on new territory in order to attain roughly equal populations.

The election code spells out factors that may be considered when drawing lines such as topography, geography, contiguity, compactness and communities of interest. The definition of a community of interest varies but it could be a neighborhood, school district or other group with a strong, common interest.

The county must adhere to federal voting rights

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laws, which generally guard against boundaries that dilute ethnic and racial minorities' representation.

Undeniably, the single most important factor in where the lines are ultimately drawn is the supervisors' home addresses.

Supervisors must live in the districts from which they are elected, and they are highly unlikely to draw lines that place a member outside his or her district.

Three of the five supervisors are also up for re-election next year: Uilkema, Piepho and Glover.

A substantial shift in their voting base could affect their re-elections, particularly if the change encourages would-be challengers who view the newly formed districts with favor.

Even with agreement over incumbency preservation, all five districts must either gain or lose territory and every shift has the potential to send line ripples into every other district.

"This is not an easy subject," Uilkema said. "We all feel possessive of the areas we represent. These are communities where we have spent a lot of time and effort."

For example, Uilkema, of Lafayette, seeks to retain in her district Rossmoor, an elderly enclave of Walnut Creek.

But Piepho wants to restore Walnut Creek to a single supervisor: her. The only city with more than one supervisor, Walnut Creek was split into three districts during the 2001 compromise.

In order to gain the entirety of Walnut Creek, Piepho must give up ground elsewhere, although she strongly supports the retention of two supervisors

in East Contra Costa County.

If she were to lose Brentwood or Knightsen to neighboring Supervisor Glover's district, he might need to shave Bay Point from his western boundary.

Glover wants to keep Bay Point and Pittsburg in the same district. He also considers the waterfront areas from Bethel Island to Pittsburg as a community of interest that should be kept intact.

District 1, the westernmost district, held by Supervisor John Gioia, of Richmond, has only two ways to expand: southeast into Lamorinda or northeast into Tara Hills and Pinole.

And Supervisor Karen Mitchoff, of Pleasant Hill, is sandwiched between Districts 3 and 5 to the east and Districts 1 and 2 to the west. Any changes in the outer district lines could trigger shifts in her boundaries, such as a split of Concord -- the county's largest city -- into more than one district.

At this point, the scenarios are hypothetical.

The Census Bureau is expected to release California population data in March, which will trigger the county's formal redistricting analysis and public hearing process. Staff members will apply census tract level population data onto digitized maps and display each step online.

The board is expected to adopt a final map by midsummer.

If it fails to pass new district lines by November, the job goes to a special panel consisting of District Attorney Mark Peterson, Assessor Gus Kramer and Clerk-Recorder Steve Weir.

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