CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Contra Costa Times editorial: Politics, not practicality, at heart of supervisor redistricting plan

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DEMONSTRATING THAT weeks of public hearings were a charade, a majority of the Contra Costa Board of Supervisors this week showed that they are more concerned about their political agendas than smart redistricting boundaries.

At issue is how to carve up the county into five similarly populated zones that would serve as the supervisorial districts for the next 10 years. New census numbers provide an opportunity for logical lines that group together neighboring communities of interest, split only one city and fix a ridiculous district that currently stretches from Walnut Creek and the San Ramon Valley to Brentwood and Discovery Bay.

But a board majority of Karen Mitchoff of Pleasant Hill, Gayle Uilkema of Lafayette and Mary Piepho of Discovery Bay made clear Tuesday that they're not interested. Officially, the supervisors narrowed the choice to three plans, but only one has enough support to pass - and it maintains the sprawling district, currently represented by Piepho.

Piepho touts the plan because it divides no cities. But she glosses over the plan's large population disparities between districts, which would dilute the voting strength of residents in the more-populated regions.

Whereas congressional districts must be almost exactly equal population and state legislative districts should have no more than a 1 percent spread in most cases, the rules for local government districts are more legally uncertain. The proposed county plan has nearly an 8 percent spread.

In other words, personal agendas are overriding the most basic redistricting principle - equal representation.

County staff will analyze the plan. But that seems merely a formality - unless residents loudly object - because the trio are most interested in political self-protection. It's the sort of behavior that led California voters to take statewide redistricting away from the Legislature and give it to an independent commission.

Piepho rejected a logical East County district from Antioch to the county line, even though population numbers would be almost perfect and the community of interest is undeniable.

Ironically, she complained in passing about her travel time - she bills the county for twice as much mileage as other supervisors, according to county records - and unwittingly highlighted the problem with her sprawling district. But she is apparently worried that she couldn't win re-election if she had to run only in East County.

Mitchoff, meanwhile, is obsessed with keeping Concord whole, even though it is the most logical city to divide because it is the largest. If it was split, the map could be easily drawn to divide no other cities and fix Piepho's sprawling district. But Mitchoff's recalcitrance makes it difficult to logically piece together the rest of the map without multiple city splits or wide population deviations. The math doesn't work.

In an amazing display of hypocrisy, Mitchoff then



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falsely insisted that there was no way to avoid a Walnut Creek split (she originally proposed dividing it three ways). Then, noting that Walnut Creek had been historically split, she rationalized that was justification for doing it again.

Mitchoff apparently fears an election challenge from a member of the Walnut Creek City Council if that city were in her district.

As for Uilkema, she wants to preserve the status quo where possible and said she will not consider a plan that takes Martinez out of her district. Since her support is needed for the three-vote coalition, that means only one of the three options is viable. She also rules out a logical plan suggested by a very engaged citizens group and this paper - a plan that generated the most support in comments submitted by the public during 14 hearings around the county.

Unless residents speak out, we hold out little hope that supervisors will put the public's interest above their own. Supervisors will next consider redistricting at 11:15 a.m. July 12 at the County Administration Building in Martinez.



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