

Rural residents discuss reapportionment fears

by Geoff Kennedy
for the Tundra Times

BETHEL — Rural Alaskans face a further erosion of their political power after the upcoming state reapportionment.

Rural Alaska is growing at a healthy rate, 18 to 24 percent since the 1980 census, but the Railbelt is growing a lot faster. The Mat-Su Borough grew 114 percent, and the Kenai Peninsula 65 percent since 1980, state officials say.

While Anchorage and Fairbanks have grown less rapidly, the opportunity to get Permanent Fund dividends is enticing more military

personnel to declare themselves Alaska residents.

Since the Supreme Court has declared the one-person-one-vote principle, the Railbelt threatens to gain more representation in the Legislature at the expense of the Bush.

When Alaska became a state, rural Alaska had 11 representatives in the House; now it has only five, according to Mike Bradner, executive director of the State Reapportionment Board.

The growth in population in the Railbelt has made rural election districts not only fewer but also more widespread. For example, Senate District M stretches from Mekoryuk

on Nunivak Island to the Canadian border.

Rep. Lyman Hoffman, D-Bethel, said he had to log 12,000 miles campaigning for the Senate seat representing 69 Yup'ik and Athabascan villages.

After new state census figures come in, the Senate district may have to include a part of Fairbanks or "wrap around" Fairbanks to include rural Railbelt communities, Bradner said during the Oct. 16 reapportionment hearing in Bethel.

Such a prospect could mean Railbelt Alaskans could dominate the Senate district and reduce the political power

of Alaskans who live away from the highway system.

Some Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta residents already are concerned that political boundaries fail to reflect cultural and linguistic entities.

The Association of Village Council Presidents this month passed a resolution in favor of creating election districts that conform to the "commonality of needs and families in the region."

Delegates object to having Yup'iks spread over three House districts, said Myron Naneng, AVCP president.

"It's very illogical," said a Mountain

continued on page twenty-one

• Voting districts

continued from page thirteen

Village man at a reapportionment hearing in the village during the AVCP annual meeting. "We are tied to Bethel by our transportation needs, by our similarity in linguistics and our similarity in service needs."

State Reapportionment Board member Gene Peltola of Bethel agrees.

"There's a real need to unify. It doesn't make sense to have Senate District M from Mekoryuk to the Canadian border," he said during the AVCP meeting.

After the 1980 census, Chevak, Hooper Bay and Scammon Bay were included in a district representing Nome, he said.

At the Mountain Village reapportionment hearing, one villager complained about being represented by a legislator from Fort Yukon, who, he says, makes service to Athabascans a priority.

At the Bethel hearing, John Guinn recommended keeping the same kinds of people with the same lifestyles in the same districts. Such districts should be set up by natural boundaries, he said. He suggested creating a Senate district with coastal villages replacing Eastern Athabascan villages.

State officials should draw districts by watersheds, testified Harold Sparck of Bethel at the Bethel reapportionment hearing. He also proposed a Senate district that would comprise the AVCP-Calista and Bristol Bay regions. Those two groups are closest linguistically and culturally, Sparck said.

Jolie Morgan also prefers a Senate district including those two regions. At the Bethel hearing, Morgan, who teaches political science at the Kuskokwim campus of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, proposed increasing the number of state senators and representatives.

Other states have larger legislatures, many with 30 senators or more and 60 representatives or more, said Bradner.

But even Wyoming, which has fewer people than Alaska, has a larger legislature, said Chuck Robinson, chairman of the Reapportionment Board.

The state has another possible alternative, a unicameral legislature. Only one state, Nebraska, has a single house of legislators. But a unicameral legislature could ensure rural Alaskans get represented in rural election districts without increasing the total number of legislators, said Reapportionment Board member Karen Parr at the Bethel hearing.

Rural Alaska will get some protection from the federal government. The Voting Rights Act requires Alaska to get its redistricting plan approved by the U.S. Justice Department to "insure that minorities and language groups will not be worse off under a new election redistricting plan than they were under the existing plan."

Unlike other state agencies which draw up plans on their own and then seek comments from the public, the board has not decided how to satisfy both federal requirements, Bradner said. That is why the board is asking Alaskans for their own solutions. Board members have not made up their minds, he insisted.

That openness makes it more crucial for rural Alaskans to get involved in making the decisions, Peltola said.

"We have not begun to discuss solutions to the problems," said Peltola. "We need our district to include like and similar needs."

Alaskans may send their written comments to: State Reapportionment Board 3601, C Street, Suite 758, Anchorage 99503.