

# Reapportionment will have big impact on rural Alaska

by Eileen MacLean  
for the Tundra Times

The State Reapportionment Board is in the process of holding statewide public hearings on redistricting in Alaska to ensure one-person/one-vote representation throughout the state.

**Inupiat Paltot**  
*People's Heritage*

## OPINION

As required by the Alaska Constitution, reapportionment must take place after each 10-year census.

Public comment will be taken by the board through January 1991, whereupon the board will submit its recommendations to the governor.

The governor will then carry out the task of redrawing Alaska House and Senate districts.

I am very concerned about redrawing district boundaries of our state, which comprises the largest land mass and most diverse Native groups of any state in the country.

It may be necessary to add legislative seats to those areas of the Railbelt Region — including Fairbanks, Anchorage, Mat-Su and Kenai — where military and civilian population claiming residency has increased disproportionately to rural areas. However, I strongly oppose further expanding the districts in rural areas at the expense of key Bush Caucus seats.

Realigning district boundaries in certain areas of the state is not the best method to ensure equal representation; rather, this would further diminish representation in rural areas of the state that have not grown as rapidly as the Railbelt Region — further inten-



sifying the divisiveness of the state to a greater extent than exists today with the current district boundaries and diverse needs.

Several districts in rural Alaska are low in "ideal" population, according to the Bureau of Census housing count, so may have to either gain population or be absorbed into another district to compensate for slower growth.

Each district already covers a vast territory, the size of several states in the Lower 48.

Southward or eastward annexation of these districts would make it even more difficult to stay in touch with constituents. Further expansion would add to the difficulty of travel for rural legislators within their districts.

For example, travel between regional hubs often requires going through Anchorage, whereas legislators representing urban areas enjoy direct

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flights to the communities within their districts.

Since statehood, the size of districts has continued to increase with each reapportionment. The bottom line is that rural districts are becoming huge and unwieldy and smaller in number.

District 22, like other rural districts of the state, enjoys a great deal of unity due to the common ethnic and cultural history of the majority of its residents.

Incorporation of additional areas, especially of the Interior rivers district, would only cause unnecessary conflict among the people.

Newly annexed areas would lack the numbers and power base to elect a person most sensitive to their culture and unique needs, so would not receive satisfactory representation.

The authority of the Federal Voters Rights Act of 1965 ensures equality of citizens' votes, meaning that districts must be divided in such a way to maintain the ethnicity of the area to enhance socio-economic integration of the people.

I am convinced that should district size be increased in such a manner counter to the Voters Rights Act, it could be challenged in court.

According to the act, the board must exhaust every option available in order to maintain the ethnic majority of legislative districts.

Adding seats to the Railbelt area at the expense of seats in rural Alaska is not the only available alternative to ensure an equal vote statewide.

I urge rural Alaskans to participate in the reapportionment process through submission of public comment, encouraging the board to recommend to the governor that more members be added to the Legislature in certain areas where population growth warrants augmented representation.

The board does not have the constitutional authority to increase the Legislature, but a recommendation would apprise the governor of the need.

Alaska has the smallest bi-cameral Legislature in the country. Its expansion would not alter the changing ratio of power between regions. Rather, expansion would allow districts outside the urban/Railbelt area to maintain

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their territory and be more of reasonable size.

Further, addition of members to the Legislature would spread the power, diminishing the stronghold of influence that certain legislators possess today.

I support the passage of a constitutional amendment setting a cap on the expansion of the body, to be put before voters in the 1992 election.

I urge others to become educated on this important issue so important to the future of our state.

To better understand the reapportionment process, I would encourage people to contact Mike Bradner, executive director of the Reapportionment Board at 561-4228 in Anchorage or my office at 852-7111 (collect).