Redistricting Hearings Draw Stream of Objections

by Igor Kossov
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Photo by Gail Robinson

In a series of hearings across New York City last week, lawmakers, special interest groups, community organizations and private citizens blasted Senate and Assembly redistricting proposals put out by the Legislative Task Force on Demographic Research and Reapportionment (LATFOR), sometimes using words like “embarrassing” and “abomination.”

Most complaints involved the Senate lines, though the Assembly lines got some attention. Hearing attendants described concerns about splitting up communities, diluting minority votes and gerrymandering districts in order to make it easier for senate Republicans to win.

Governor Andrew Cuomo called the proposed districts “unacceptable” and vowed to veto them. Many democratic lawmakers and dissatisfied groups are pushing for the veto and would prefer to entrust redistricting to the federal courts. Over 100 people testified in Queens and over 50 testified in the Bronx.

“This is the worst gerrymandering in the history of New York State,” said Sen. Michael Gianaris who represents Northwestern Queens. Under the proposal, Gianaris’s Astoria-dominated district has been split, pitting him against fellow Democrat and friend, Sen. Jose Peralta, a pattern that occurred in four senate districts.

Gianaris complained that under the proposal, the Latino-heavy Suffolk county will be split into three districts, undermining the Latino vote. He added that Westchester, where three cities will be grouped into one district and Rochester where one city is being split into three districts, will face the same problem of minority disenfranchisement.

He also gave Hempstead as an example, where an African-American population will be split among four districts, “All represented by white men â€“ this in a town that has African-American representation in the assembly and two African-Americans in the County legislature.”

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southeast Queens Community Coalition for Civil Rights also protested against what they called disproportionate white representation of minority communities. Garth Marshant, president of the Southeast Queens coalition, said that it’s wrong that two thirds of Queens is represented by white men while Queens County is only 39 percent white, according to 2010 Census figures.

Assemblyman John “Jack” McEneny, the co-chair of LATFOR, countered that the task force does not look at the race of elected officials and that it’s his understanding that many legislators capably represent constituents of a different race than they are. “That’s pretty racist” to suggest otherwise, he said.

Bronx residents were similarly incensed that Bronx’s community board 7 remains split among three different assembly districts. Residents of Norwood complained that the neighborhood would be split between the 33rd and 34th senate districts. Don Bluestone, executive director at Mosholu Montefiore Community Center said that Norwood’s voice is small as is and to further reduce it would be “devastating.”

One of the loudest voices to speak out against redistricting came from Eastern Queens United, a coalition of community leaders from Glen Oaks, Floral Park, New Hyde Park, Bellerose, and Queens Village who opposed splitting Eastern Queens among ethnic lines.

“The lines are an abomination. They were drawn specifically to serve the interests of politicians and political parties, not the voters and communities,” said Bob Friedrich, the group’s founder.

“LATFOR completely ignored our requests and divided our community into unidentifiable blobs on a map. The borders run along not natural boundaries but along small, residential streets.”

But Eastern Queens United opponents, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, who pushed for a majority Asian community in Eastern Queens that would include part of Long Island, are also not entirely happy. Jerry Vattamala, a lawyer for the fund, who testified in Queens, said that Flushing and Bayside are insufficiently integrated as an assembly district and that Bay Terrace needs to be removed. He also said that Richmond Hill and South Ozone Park remain divided among many assembly districts.

However, Vattamala said, AALDEF is more pleased with assembly districts 49, 47, 40 and 25. “At least they gave us something,” he said, adding that the group will continue to fight for an improved version of the redistricting proposal.

McEneny said that most concerns LATFOR heard so far in New York City center around splitting ethnic communities and neighborhoods that wish to remain together, moreso than considerations about the advantages of political parties. He said that the task force is already looking at ways to improve on its proposal and take public concerns into account.

However, he said, that sometimes LATFOR’s options are limited due to the complexity of district partitions and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Among other provisions, the act mandates that communities with over 50 percent minority populations must be grouped together.

“You can’t change one district line without changing another district. Whatever you put in, you have to take out,” said McEneny. “If the part you put out goes to a Voting Rights act district, what happens to their neighbors?”

Governor Cuomo’s veto threat hangs over the proposal which Gianaris called “DOA.” Peralta said that he is confident that the federal court, which would have to take over in case of a veto, would to a “better and faster” job than LATFOR, something many of the redistricting opponents agreed with.

McEneny disagreed and quoted the Governor's earlier statement that bringing in the federal court would cause "chaos" as there is less understanding of local community concerns at the federal level.

Not everyone came to the hearings to complain. Maf Misbah Uddin, a Jamaica resident and president of the New York Central Labor Council praised the new assembly district 24, saying "this is the first time there is a South Asian dominated district. South Asians can finally come together." Miguel Rordiguez, a business owner from Corona offered words of support for the overlooked congressional districts, saying that Dominicans in Northern Manhattan and the Bronx would have better nationwide representation under the plan.

But most people remain dissatisfied and do not appear to show much faith in LATFOR.

"There's all kinds of contradictions and a human being has to make a decision. When a line is drawn, someone will always cry foul and someone else will stay silent. It goes with the territory," said McEneny.