

Reapportionment Commission comes under fire again

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BY NANCY COOK LAUER | WEST HAWAII TODAY

HILO -- State legislative boundaries look increasingly likely to be decided by the Hawaii Supreme Court, two Big Island residents said Tuesday.

On the one hand, the way the population is counted continues to draw opposition. On the other, a proposal to split West Hawaii into two Senate districts has sparked a political firestorm.

The state Reapportionment Commission has passed a compromise measure that removes out-of-state students and military living on bases when determining the population of new House and Senate districts, but counts most other military and nonresidents.

The option, which passed 5-3 Monday in Honolulu, removes 16,458 people from the count, about 3,500 short of the number that would grant Hawaii Island its fourth Senate seat. Two other options rejected by the commission would have eliminated as many as 79,821 nonresidents.

"The commission's action just further muddies the waters," said Hilo attorney Stan Roehrig, who represents state Sen. Malama Solomon, D-Waimea, Hamakua, North Hilo, and three members of the Hawaii County Democratic Party.

Roehrig said the state constitution dictates that nonresidents should be removed from the count.

"The people of the county of Hawaii want a fair shake, and the only way to accomplish that is by judicial review by the Supreme Court," Roehrig added.

Also threatening a lawsuit Tuesday, but for a different reason, was state Sen. Josh Green, D-North and South Kohala, North and South Kona.

Green said behind-the-scenes shenanigans are working to gerrymander a district that will specifically benefit former Sen. Lorraine Inouye so she won't have to run against Solomon, the incumbent senator in Waimea, next year.

The map, Green said, puts Waimea into the West Hawaii district and removes all of South Kona from West Hawaii. The new southern district is thought to favor a Republican.

"I blew a gasket when I found out about the proposal that Kona would be divided in half," Green said.

In testimony to the commission, Green named Reapportionment Commissioner Dylan Nonaka as someone who could benefit. Nonaka recently left his post of executive director of the Hawaii Republican Party and moved back to the Big Island, where he was born.

Commission members must sit out two terms before being eligible to run for a district, but family members could benefit, Green said. Nonaka's mother had run unsuccessfully for County Council against South Kona Councilwoman Brenda Ford.

"By gerrymandering the districts in this way, Kona will be split in half. This is poison to the entire West Hawaii community and runs counter to the expectations of every citizen in that region," Green told the commission. "If this secretive approach to reapportionment continues over the final days of this commission's work, there will be immediate legal action taken against those committee members who conspired to gerrymander the Big Island districts to benefit specific candidates, with the result of displacing many thousands of Big Island voters."

Nonaka discounted Green's comments as a "conspiracy theory built on his paranoia." He said his mother doesn't plan to run, and he wishes people would leave her out of it.

"My response is, Josh Green is insane," Nonaka said.

Inouye, who left her Senate seat in 2008 in an unsuccessful bid for mayor, told West Hawaii Today she's "98 percent sure" she'll seek a Senate seat next year. She said she's received no phone calls from commissioners about what kind of district she would like.

Inouye said she has, however, supported a map proposed by a Puna community member that takes Puna's rapid growth into account by sliding the three Senate districts clockwise on the island. It would split Kona, she said, but that would only benefit West Hawaii.

"I don't know why they shouldn't be represented by two senators," Inouye said, adding Hilo was split for years. "I don't think Kona would fare poorly if the map is drawn differently."

The best course of action, said Inouye, is for the entire island to work together to secure that fourth Senate seat.

Nonaka has consistently voted against excluding the military and students from the population count, a stance that drew a lot of heat during public hearings last week on the Big Island. But he thinks it unfair to not count military and students, while counting illegal aliens, green card holders, mainland contractors on six-month contracts and snowbirds.

"I'd really like to get a fourth Senate seat," Nonaka said, "but there's a bigger public policy issue at stake."

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