S.D. council redistricting map may change; City Heights issue remains unresolved

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The preliminary map of reconfigured San Diego City Council districts, which has undergone eight public hearings, could still change significantly before the Redistricting Commission adopts a final version next month.

Commission Chairman Ralph Pesqueira issued that warning last night even before the panel had considered the question of whether to unify City Heights, an issue that has been hanging over the redistricting process for weeks.

Many activists had hoped that consultant Bruce Cain's voting analysis of City Heights residents would resolve this question. Instead, Cain's presentation yesterday only seemed to increase the uncertainty surrounding it.

After listening to the results of Cain's study, the commission decided to delay discussion until its meeting next Wednesday at 4 p.m. in City Hall.

The commission plans to hold three meetings next week and as many more sessions as it needs to adopt a final map by Aug. 12.

The commission, a panel of seven volunteers, has been using data from the 2000 census to reconfigure boundaries of the eight council districts. The goal is to create voting districts with about 153,000 residents each within boundaries that are contiguous and relatively compact.

The panel asked Cain to do the analysis to determine if leaving City Heights as it is -- divided among Districts 3, 4 and 7 -- would violate the Voting Rights Act, which was designed to protect the strength of minority voters from being diluted.

The commission's preliminary map would put City Heights, which has 80,000 ethnically diverse and mostly low-income residents, into districts 3 and 7. An alternative map would put the community into one district, but it would also break up the gay coalition in District 3.

During the public hearings on the preliminary map, many City Heights residents and gay activists urged the commission to leave the boundaries of City Heights as they are.

Other activists suggested that dividing the community already has disenfranchised minority voters and called for its unification.

Cain, a redistricting expert, said his analysis did not show clear evidence that the Voting
Rights Act would be violated if City Heights was left split. However, he said, it did find some evidence that could be used to support a violation claim.

"There are some facts that could be used by plaintiffs," he said.

Based on a variety of races with minority candidates, Cain’s analysis showed that African-American and Latino voters often vote together and that their voting choices can contrast significantly with those of white voters.

Still, Cain said, the alternative map would not increase the minority strength enough to make a difference under the Voting Rights Act, meaning that it would not form a new district with a majority of minority voters who vote along similar lines. That’s because Asians in City Heights generally did not vote for the same candidates as their African-American and Latino neighbors.

Despite the cloudy legal issues, Cain said, his analysis did show that there are some communities of interest that the commission should consider protecting.

"I feel your pain . . .," Cain said. "I think you're going to have to make some value judgments."

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