

Commissioners approve new redistricting map

By T.J. Aulds | Posted: Friday, March 23, 2012 12:00 am

A split commissioners court approved a new redistricting map Thursday that appears to have garnered the favor of federal officials. The settlement map which was approved along party lines did not find favor with minority groups some of which called it unfair.

The map the second within a week isn't much different from the initial settlement map a split commissioners court sent to the U.S. Department of Justice last week.

The only significant change the county's redistricting attorneys said was moving a portion of West Texas City out of commissioner Precinct 1 into Precinct 3. Trey Trainor of the county's redistricting firm Beirne Maynard and Parsons said only 52 residents were affected by the adjustment.

Much of the change was made to accommodate a request from the justice department.

The map Precinct 1 Commissioner Pat Doyle complained woefully underrepresented minorities in his precinct.

"Each time a new map comes out the minority population gets smaller" Doyle said.

He complained the minority representation in his precinct dropped by about 11 percent among the voting age population and by about 9.5 percent in the general population compared to the lines drawn in 2001.

After three hours of talks with justice department lawyers however lawyers from the county's redistricting law firm came to commissioners with an agreement with the justice department. Commissioners reconvened and approved in a split vote to authorize the firm of Beirne Maynard and Parsons to finalize the settlement with justice officials.

The firm's Trey Trainor said he was hopeful the justice department would sign off on the settlement before a federal court in Galveston hears arguments in a redistricting lawsuit filed by the Democratic members of the commissioners court.

Doyle called the settlement "a bailout by the justice department of a failed process."

Doyle who was the main political target of the redistricting process to move the Democrat into a Republican-favored precinct compared the new plan to "putting lipstick on a pig."

Precinct 3 Commissioner Stephen Holmes said the new map split as many as 28 voting precincts and it would confuse voters and discourage them from going to the polls.

“I’m disappointed that this is where we have ended up” Holmes said.

Asked if there was a chance that the federal panel hearing his and Doyle’s case could step in Holmes said he didn’t think so.

“It’s done” a clearly disappointed Holmes said while carrying out a large box that contained his files on redistricting. “It’s done.”

The harshest critics of the map came from a coalition of groups that represent minorities as well as Gulf Coast Interfaith whose representative Joe Compian called the map “repugnant.”

The group including the local chapters of the NAACP LULAC and the Galveston County Coalition for Justice sent a letter to the justice department during the meeting Thursday complaining the map had a significant detrimental impact on minority voters.

“I thought I would never see the day where the value of the vote of one particular minority group has more value over another minority group” Compian said.

He complained the justice department and the county’s redistricting law firm were focused on the black population within the precincts and paid little attention to the growing Hispanic population.

Compian said too the county missed out on a chance to have a minority-impacted Precinct 1 by adopting the map the commissioners did.

Precinct 4 Commissioner Ken Clark defended the process.

“From the very beginning I think this court’s intention was to comply with (federal civil rights laws) to make sure we maintained the minoritymajority status in Precinct 3 and build all the other districts around that” Clark said.

Clark declined to comment further saying he wanted to wait until the justice department signed off on the county’s new map.