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EDITORIALS

Trashing justice in Galveston County

Galveston County shouldn't rely on previously rejected redistricting plan.

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The U.S. Supreme Court tossed the South into chaos when it removed federal preclearance requirements to voting changes. The mandatory slow and steady negotiations, and the subsequent trials that were inherently part of any voting change, ensured that all stakeholders had a say in the process. Preclearance was a check against man's anarchic impulse when handling our most sensitive political right. The crisis of losing it opened up a Pandora's box of risk, but also opportunity. Without federal oversight, disparate groups can work together at a local level to come up with redistricting plans that fit a community's wants and needs, but not necessarily the inflexible requirements of the Voting Rights Act.

Georgia set this model in its 2000 redistricting, when black leaders in the state Senate pushed for a district scheme that shifted away from majority-minority safe seats and instead split the black population among a greater number of "influence districts." This system relied on the idea that black voters could build a coalition to fulfill the Voting Rights Act's promise of electing the candidates of their choice. It was successful for a while, but the 2006 reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act reaffirmed the strict requirement of majority-minority districts to comply with the law's guarantee of minority representation. No politics, no coalitions, only bright-line rules.

Without preclearance, politicians have the opportunity to push at the edges of election law to create districts that fit local needs. Instead of relying on federal say-so, communities can create their own solutions.

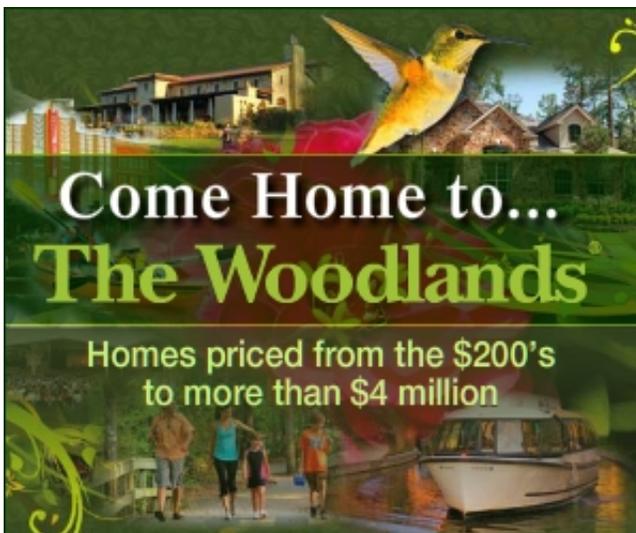
They can, but aren't. At least not in Galveston.

The justice of the peace system in Galveston County is admittedly in dire need of an overhaul. There are too many justices covering not enough cases, and even the odd circumstance of two officials in the same district - the result of convoluted solutions to meet strict federal mandates. But now that federal oversight is gone, and folks can use this opportunity to unite the community behind a new plan. They aren't. Instead, three commissioners have dug a previously-rejected plan out of the trash and are cramming it down voters' throats without even talking to the one minority member of Commissioners Court.

Actively avoiding minority input was one of the reasons that the Justice Department rejected the plan in the first place. Now commissioners are trying to push it through without public debate.

It is easy to imagine four commissioners sitting at a table and coming to a mutually acceptable result. Isn't that how our representative government is supposed to work? But instead of using the newfound lack of federal oversight to prove that preclearance wasn't necessary in the first place, Galveston commissioners are exploiting the opportunity to force through an old plan, tarnished with accusations of racism and discrimination.

This is bad policy. This is lazy. This is what life is like after the Voting Rights Act.



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