

December 1, 2011

Good evening. My name is Patty MacLeish and I live in the Point section of Newport. I am here this evening to speak on behalf of the League of Women Voters of RI and the League of Women Voters of Newport County.

The League of Women Voters supports a state redistricting process and standards that promote fair and effective representation in the state legislature and in the U.S. House of Representatives. The League further believes that the standards on which a redistricting plan is based should include substantially equal population, geographic contiguity, and protection from diluting the voting strength of a racial or linguistic minority.

Further, it should prohibit the consideration of the political affiliations of registered voters and previous election results.

And finally, to the extent possible, the standards should also include: respect for boundaries of municipalities and census boundaries and consideration of geographic boundaries particularly where they would be an impediment to travel within a district. Even a cursory review of the plans presented show that as regards to Newport County the plans do not live up to these standards. The League makes these comments in full realization that Newport County is made up of several islands, making the issue of contiguity difficult. That being said, it is hard to understand why there are no plans that keep more of Aquidneck Island within the same house districts. Under both House plans A and B, Aquidneck Island is represented by 7 different house districts.

The town of Portsmouth appears to bear the brunt of these divisions with both House plans dividing the town among four representatives. In House plan B Hog Island and Prudence Island fall within district 69; these two islands contain only 1.5% of the town of Portsmouth's voting population (198). In house plan A, where at least some part of District 69 includes part of the Aquidneck Island portion of the district, the percentage of Portsmouth citizens in the district is only 1.7% of the voting population. Middletown and Tiverton come out only slightly better under these plans. With Senate Plan C, Middletown is, in fact, divided into three senate districts. In Senate Plan D, Tiverton is divided into 3 districts as well. Why should this matter? In voting for senators and assembly members, citizens of a voting district should be assured that the concerns of their town and neighborhoods are truly represented by their senator and assembly person.

Let's look as just one issue that unites Aquidneck Islanders—bridge tolls. In Senate Plan D, part of the Town of Tiverton is included in Senate district 10. When it comes to the issue of bridge tolls, will the citizens in the northern section of the town feel secure that the senator from district 10 will represent the Town of Tiverton, when their senator's district is comprised mostly of towns to the north and includes citizens who might never travel to Aquidneck Island? Might not those citizens of District 10 who are not so dependent on bridge travel feel that tolls on the bridges are a good thing?

The same quandary arises for the senator representing Senate district 12, which under all the plans includes Middletown, Little Compton, and Tiverton. Raising tolls on the Pell Bridge might seem a good idea to a good part of that senator's constituency, but not to the citizens of Middletown.

These divisions of the towns into many parts that do not share contiguous boundaries or common interests and have little respect for the boundaries of municipalities dilute the strength of a citizen's vote in the State House.

The League would like to see greater respect for municipal boundaries and more consideration of the common interests of the citizens within the voting districts of Newport County and in particular Aquidneck Island.