Everett in or out of the 1st District? Judges will decide

By Larry Lange
P-I Reporter

Campaign strategies hung in the balance as a three-member panel of federal judges prepared to rule on the legality of the state's new congressional district boundaries.

Judges Jack Tanner, Otto Skopil Jr. and Walter McGovern yesterday heard two hours of arguments in Seattle from factions fighting over the state Legislature's decision to move Everett into the state's 1st Congressional District.

Opponents of that switch yesterday proposed their own redistricting plan that would alter district boundaries across the state as well as return Everett to the 2nd District.

The judges listened to arguments from lawyers for both sides yesterday but made no decision on the case. One attorney speculated a ruling could come as early as today.

"You are risking the possibility of disruption" in election campaigns said Assistant State Attorney General Phil Austin of the impending court decision. "The magnitude would depend on the amount of the changes (in boundaries) but there is an element of disruption."

Residents sue

Everett, the historical kingpin of the 2nd district, found itself an appendage to the Seattle-dominated 1st District after state lawmakers got through with redistricting.

Several residents sued in federal court to have Everett returned to the 2nd District arguing that the redistricting was unconstitutional and didn't meet established court guidelines.

"It does not reflect a good faith effort to achieve mathematical equality of population within the congressional districts." said the court complaint filed in April.

Candidates for congressional seats have set up their campaigns based on the boundaries drawn by the legislature. But the opponents' plan drawn up by University of Washington geography professor Richard Morrill would again change the boundaries and require candidates to alter their approaches.

A court decision striking down the latest boundaries and adopting Morrill's plan would mean, for one, that U.S. Rep. Joel Pritchard, R-Seattle, would have to make another change in his campaign tactics.

Prichard, whose 1st District gained Everett and some rural parts of Snohomish County as a result of the legislature's boundary changes has already readjusted his re-election campaign pitch to account for those new areas, staffer Grant Degginger said yesterday.

Democrat is delighted

Morrill's plan would put Everett back in the 2nd District and would adjust Pritchard's district to include more of North Seattle. The prospect delighted Democrat Brian Long, Pritchard's key opponent, who said it would bring him a lot of Democratic support.

Fred Tausend, attorney for the Everett group said the plan would put the residence of one 1st District candidate, Republican Lewis Jones, outside the district boundary.

Pritchard could not be reached for comment, but Degginger said a switch making Everett back out of the district "would certainly require us to shift some strategy. We had just planned on having Everett in the district."

Initially, the Everett-based Citizens For Fair Redistricting group, which brought the suit, asked the court to appoint a special master to draw up proposed new boundaries.

But Tausend said Morrill's proposal offers a "perfect solution" to the alleged problems with the current boundaries.

He said it better meets the "one man, one vote" test by resulting in district population variations that are smaller than in the plans approved by the legislature and Gov. John Spellman.

He said Morrill's plan would eliminate the legislature's division of Pierce, Kitsap and Mason Counties and would reunite the Colville Indian Reservation in Eastern Washington which now is split by the enacted boundary between the 4th and 5th Districts.

The plan, besides shifting Everett back into the 2nd District, would move the 7th District south into the Highline area south of Seattle. It would push the new 8th District further south and east into Pierce County and return Bremerton suburbs and the Bangor submarine base to the 6th District.

Tausend said adoption of the plan would deal with the Everett residents' complaints and correct other deficiencies with a minimum of disruptions to state voters" and the political process.

Austin and another assistant state attorney general Tom Bjorgen, disagreed. Bjorgen said the court would be entering "a political mine field" if it struck down the boundaries set by the legislature.

"Once the court gets into…adjusting congressional district boundaries in accordance with economic, social and cultural interests…it's very dangerous business," he said.

Bjorgen successfully asked the court yesterday to remove the city and port of Everett as plaintiffs in the case, on grounds that the government bodies did not have legal status to sue.

Seattle competition

Port officials fear that if Everett is included in a Seattle-dominated district, Everett will lose its clout in getting federal financing for projects like harbor dredging and dock construction.

"It will be at a serious disadvantage (against Seattle) in competing for steadily decreasing federal funds." said the port's lawyer Douglas Graham.

Austin said the present boundaries are the best the legislature could come up with given legislative politics and a Spellman veto of the legislature's first plan. He said the power to redraw the boundaries is placed "not with a professional geographer (Morrill) talented though he may be—it is placed in an elected legislature."

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