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Redistricting Reform Clears State Senate Committee, Stalled in House

[Harrisburg] — Despite strong bi-partisan support in the Pennsylvania legislature, time is getting short to reform the process that will determine the state's legislative districts after the next census. Once drawn the new districts will be set for the next decade. On May 22 reform legislation creating an independent citizens' redistricting commission to draw Pennsylvania's voting districts was unanimously approved by the Senate State Government Committee. However, resistance from a committee chair in the House is holding up consideration of similar legislation there. The resistance comes despite a majority of House members registering support by co-sponsoring the legislation. Among the co-sponsors are local representatives Rich Irvin (R, 81st Legislative District), Scott Conklin (D, 77th Legislative District), and Mike Hanna (D, 76th Legislative District).

When the Pennsylvania State Supreme Court ruled in February that the state's US Congressional districts were unconstitutionally gerrymandered, only those districts were changed. The court's action did not change the voting districts for state House or state Senate. Nor did it change the state's system for drawing future district boundaries. Without new state legislation, the same process that produced gerrymandered districts will again be used to draw both state and federal districts for the decade following the upcoming 2020 Census.

Pennsylvania's districting process can only be changed by amending the state constitution. Constitutional amendments must pass the legislature in two consecutive years before being submitted to voters for final approval. For this three-year process to be completed in time to have any effect on voting districts in the 2020's, districting reforms must pass both the state House and Senate before this year's legislative session ends in June.

The bill creating an independent citizen's districting commission that the Senate committee unanimously approved now moves to the Senate floor. A vote will likely take place soon after June 4, when the Senate is back in session. Majority Leader Jake Corman (R, 34th Senatorial District) has expressed support for reform, as has Minority Leader Jay Costa (D, 43rd Senatorial District). On Monday, May 21, President Pro Tem Joe Scarnati (R, 25th Senatorial District) joined them.

In the House, the Chair of the State Government Committee (Daryl Metcalfe, R, 12th Legislative District) has repeatedly blocked consideration of an independent citizen's commission. House Minority Leader Frank Dermody (D, 33rd Legislative District) continues to introduce new bills creating the citizens' commission, three of them co-sponsored by Majority Leader Dave Reed (R, 62nd Legislative District). However, with the support of other Republicans on the committee, Metcalfe has refused to hold hearings and, on multiple occasions, has amended reform bills to eliminate the independent citizen's commission and instead increase the districting power of partisan politicians.

Even without a bill originating in the House, the Senate bill will go the House if it passes - which is likely. House Majority Leader Mike Turzai (R, 28th Legislative District) will assign the Senate's version of the legislation to a House committee which must pass it before it can come to a vote in the House. Fair Districts Centre County



leader Debbie Trudeau says, "Turzai and the leaders of both parties in the House need to take control of this situation. Daryl Metcalfe and a few members of the House's State Government Committee should not be able to block legislation supported by bipartisan majorities in both chambers of the Pennsylvania legislature. It's a dramatic example of the polarizing power of gerrymandering to insure re-election rather than respond to the voters, over 68% of whom support reform."

Fair Districts PA is a nonpartisan, statewide coalition of individuals and organizations that believes that free and fair elections are the foundation of our democracy. Its mission is to ensure that the redistricting process in Pennsylvania is fair and transparent. For more information, go to www.FairDistrictsPA.com.

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