

Redrawing the map

Elections supervisor discusses challenges of redistricting

By JOSH SALMAN

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PUNTA GORDA — Charlotte County Supervisor of Elections Paul Stamoulis is no artist, but in the next few months his drawing skills will be put to the test.

About 3 million Florida voters approved a constitutional amendment last November calling for state lawmakers to remap their district lines. State population growth will also mean two new Florida representatives on Capitol Hill, which, coupled with previously scheduled local adjustments, leaves all three levels of government drawing new boundaries for elected officials. Stamoulis discussed how the redistricting could affect local elections with members of the Charlotte County League of Women Voters during a luncheon Thursday at Laishley Crab House in Punta Gorda. He said that while district changes were clearly needed, the timing will present several challenges in preparing for the 2012 primaries.

“You don’t even have to be well-versed in voting to look at these districts and see that something is wrong with the way they’re drawn,” Stamoulis said. “People with like interests in like communities should be located in the same district. What do we have in common with the cattle ranchers in the middle of the state and cities on Florida’s east coast?”

Stamoulis points to Congressman Tom Rooney’s District 16 as an example of a confusing sector. The boundary begins in the Palm Beach area, cuts across the middle of the state and wraps around parts of Charlotte County.

At the state level, Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, has a similar district shape — oddly maneuvering around different communities from Manatee to Lee.

Stamoulis has already begun reviewing the demographics to recommend changes to the state before Legislators meet in January for a special session to tackle the issue.

The Florida House and Senate also plan to launch a feature on their websites this summer allowing voters to weigh in on where they believe the new boundaries should go.

“Where these lines will be drawn will become very important — it’s what everyone is interested in,” Stamoulis said. “Nobody really knows at this point because we’re still so early in the process.”

Stamoulis is also busy mapping out changes to each of Charlotte’s five County Commission districts, which are typically updated every decade along with the adjustments in Congress.

Districts, both local and national, have to be split fairly evenly by population. Migration trends since the last Census count show the Englewood area had the county’s greatest population growth — shrinking the size of District 3 and moving each district line east.

Officials said because commissioners are elected through a countywide vote, the changes shouldn’t present too many problems. The shift, however, could force a commissioner to run in a different district if he’s currently living near a border that’s set to be moved.

Commissioners ultimately have the final say when approving new boundaries.

“These changes are probably going to be pretty minor,” Commission Chairman Bob Starr said. “I think it can be done without disenfranchising any commissioner from their district.”

Officials are now working to ensure the changes get done before the looming primary elections in August 2012.

Even if the Florida Legislature comes to a redistricting agreement on the first day of the special session in January, it will leave local election offices only 55 days to prepare. But the process will likely take much longer, with several GOP lawmakers, including Gov. Rick Scott, already announcing plans to challenge implementation.

The Florida League of Women Voters has filed a lawsuit to force Scott to send the redistricting measure to the Justice Department. It wants to ensure voters have enough time to make an informed decision on candidates campaigning for 2012.

“It was pretty obvious they were going to drag their feet, but as a result of this lawsuit things are moving,” said Teresa Jenkins, president of the Charlotte County League of Women Voters. “We have become the watchdog. We’re going to do whatever we can to make sure the process works the way it’s supposed to work.”

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STAMOULIS
