Redrawn maps pit sitting legislators against each other
*The Legislature is free to reject or adjust the recommended maps*

Copyright © 2021 - Albuquerque Journal

**BY DAN MCKAY** JOURNAL CAPITOL BUREAU

SANTA FE — Democrat Dayan Hochman-Vigil and Republican Bill Rehm represent adjacent districts in the state House stretching from the foothills of Albuquerque to the North Valley.

But they live just 3 miles apart and would be paired in the same district under every House map recommended by the Citizen Redistricting Committee.

It could force the two incumbents into an unusual decision — move, retire or run against each other next year to keep a seat in the House.

A total of 19 incumbents face similar pairings in at least one plan recommended by the citizen committee, illustrating a key challenge awaiting New Mexico lawmakers set to meet in a special session next month.

The Legislature is free to reject the recommended maps or adjust them to untangle potential pairings. But they are an added complication as lawmakers and Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham draft new maps to reflect population changes over the past decade.

The toughest choices may involve Democratic Sens. Katy Duhigg and Bill O’Neill of Albuquerque, Republican Sens. William Burt and Ron Griggs of Alamogordo, and Hochman- Vigil and Rehm — all of whom are paired in every suggested plan. The committee proposed three maps each for the state House of Representatives and state Senate.

Hochman-Vigil, an attorney, said she wasn’t surprised to end up in a proposed district with a fellow legislator. It never made much sense, she said, for District 15 to be rooted in the North Valley, but hook past Interstate 25 to pick up neighborhoods farther east.

“I think the most important thing is making sure the communities of interest are represented in a district that make sense for those communities,” Hochman-Vigil said in an interview.

But Rehm, a retired sheriff’s captain, said the proposals stand to weaken the legislative influence of his constituents in Northeast Albuquerque. As the only Albuquerque Republican left in the state House, he said, he is likely to be targeted by Democrats in the majority.

“To go ahead and do this is just unbelievable,” Rehm said of the potential pairing.

O’Neill, who has represented a North Valley based seat in the Senate since 2013, said he was disappointed to hear that all three plans would put him in the same district as Duhigg. He supports independent redistricting, he said, but pairing the same incumbents in every proposal isn’t helpful.

“The point is to give us a choice,” he said. “That’s not exactly a choice, is it?”

**Redistricting principles**

The proposed maps were adopted by a redistricting committee designed to limit political influence over the new boundaries.

The seven-person panel — led by retired Supreme Court Justice Edward Chávez — was prohibited by law from considering partisan data as it evaluated maps.

Its membership, however, included some politicians. The seven-person panel included two former Democratic legislators, a former chairman of the state Republican Party and a former Republican candidate for the Legislature. The other two members were independents — a high school teacher and a demographer.

Six of the seven members live in Albuquerque.

By law, the committee was instructed to prioritize keeping communities of interest together, drawing compact districts and upholding traditional redistricting principles. Members could consider where incumbents live only in limited circumstances, and it was a lesser priority.

Legislators, however, will face no such limits when they meet in the special session expected to begin Dec. 6.

For the first time in 30 years, Democrats will control both legislative chambers and the Governor’s Office the year after a census. They are set to adopt maps for congressional and legislative seats, in addition to the Public Education Commission.

**Partisan fairness**

The maps that lawmakers will start with appear to match the political makeup of the state as a whole, according to independent analysis.

In a report sent to the Legislature, David Cottrell, a University of Georgia professor hired to evaluate the maps, said he found “little evidence to suggest that the maps are unexpectedly unfair.”

Based on voting patterns in statewide elections from 2012 to 2020, he said, the maps can be expected to produce:

■ 44 to 47 Democrats in the 70-person state House, compared to 45 now.

■ 27 or 28 Democrats in the state Senate, compared to 27 now.

■ Two or three Democrats in the U.S. House, compared to two now.

A separate evaluation by the nonpartisan Princeton Gerrymandering Project awarded an “A” for partisan fairness to every legislative map adopted by the citizen committee. It didn’t grade the congressional concepts.

**Rural voices**

Republican Sens. Burt and Griggs live about 6 miles apart in Alamogordo and would share a district in all three proposed maps for the Senate.

Burt’s current district stretches north and then east, ending by Roswell. Griggs’ seat goes the opposite direction, toward Doña Ana County.

A few simple adjustments, Griggs said, would make it possible for both senators to maintain their separate districts.

“I think their guidance is fantastic,” Griggs said of the committee recommendations, “but I’d imagine we’ll see some tweaking of the maps.”

Burt said the recommended maps are a disappointment. Forcing him and Griggs into the same district, he said, would muffle the legislative voice of Otero County, an area home to Holloman Air Force Base, White Sands, mountain communities and the Mescalero Apache Reservation.

“Just because we’re not in the upper Rio Grande valley, life out here in rural New Mexico is just as important and has just as many problems as it does in Bernalillo or any other county, quite frankly,” Burt said. “It’s important that we, as rural senators or representatives, don’t lose that kind of representation.”

The challenge will go well beyond Alamogordo and Albuquerque. Among the legislators who are paired in at least two plans are Senate Minority Leader Greg Baca of Belen and Sen. Joshua Sanchez of Bosque; Sens. David Gallegos of Eunice and Gay Kernan of Hobbs; and House Minority Whip Rod Montoya of Farmington and Rep. James Strickler of Farmington — all of whom are Republicans.

Roswell Rep. Phelps Anderson, a former Republican who has no party affiliation, would also be paired in multiple plans. He said Wednesday that growth in southeastern New Mexico will clearly require changes to districts in the region, but that he hasn’t decided yet whether to run again.

In past redistricting rounds, lawmakers have generally sought to avoid pairing incumbents as much as possible. In 2011, incumbent GOP Reps. Dennis Kintigh and Bob Wooley were paired after two Roswell-area districts were consolidated. Wooley went on to win the 2012 primary and that year’s general election.