

**OFFICE OF THE ULSTER COUNTY LEGISLATURE
MEETING MINUTES**

NAME OF GROUP: Commission On Reapportionment

DATE: January 26, 2011

TIME: 3:00 P.M.

PLACE: UCOB, Legislative Library Conference Room, 6th Floor

MEMBERS PRESENT: Vernon Benjamin, Paul Benkert, Michael Catalinotto, Cynthia Lowe, Rich Messina, Dare Thompson, Bill West

MEMBERS EXCUSED: None

OTHERS ATTENDING: Dennis Doyle, Planning Director; Robert Leibowitz, Sr. Planner; Sylvia Wohlfahrt, Director, IS; Roland Bloomer, Assistant County Attorney; Laura Walls, Assistant Comptroller; Hugh Reynolds, Reporter; Tom Kadgen, LWV; Victoria Fabella, Deputy Clerk, Legislature; Beth Murphy, Saugerties Resident

- The meeting was called to order by Bill West at 3:01 PM.
- A motion was made by Bill West, Seconded by Michael Catalinotto, to approve the Minutes from the January 19, 2011 Meeting. All in favor, Carried.
- Oath of Office

After discussion, reviewing legal opinions and reading the oath, the Commissioners unanimously agreed to sign oaths of office.

- Presentation: Dennis Doyle and Robert Leibowitz, Redistricting Software
(See handouts: *A Brief Introduction to Census Geography For Reapportionment* and *Mapitude for Redistricting: Extension for ArcGIS*)

Rob Leibowitz gave a thoroughly review of the handout *A Brief Introduction to Census Geography For Reapportionment*. Mr. Leibowitz then gave a demonstration of the software.

- Software Cost :Approximately \$3,500
- The Commission will be working with Census Block Data- 100% Count
- ArcGIS is a mapping program the County Planning Department uses for things such as referrals, analysis, open space planning, etc. The software being looked at is an extension that plugs into the existing program for the sole purpose of redistricting.
- The County currently has this program extension on a 30-day trial.
- The program allows you to select blocks on the fly within a district and it will tell you the total population that you have selected within that district. It tells you your deviation as you select blocks in and out to establish district boundaries.

- The district boundaries are real in terms of the geography that can be found on the ground. All census blocks, census tracts and census districts have a real place on the ground, i.e. a political subdivision, a street, a stream, or something so you can actually find them.
- Dennis Doyle commented that the program allows you to establish multiple ways to split the populations and add and subtract. He suspects that geographically the Commission will come to an agreement of what a base district looks like. Then there will be additions and subtractions off of that base to suit the individual members of the Commission until a consensus is reached.
- Election Districts can be overlaid on the maps.

Michael Catalinotto: Q./ Did we have a consultant work on that Reapportionment 10 years ago? A./ Rob Leibowitz: I believe one of the political parties hired somebody. People also came to my office with their own digital plans and I put them in a geographic format so they could be submitted for review.

The Commission discussed trying to avoid altering election districts. Bill West commented that Commissioner of Elections Tom Turco said the Board of Elections has the authority and ability to establish a new election district if it comes down to that.

Dennis Doyle suggested thinking about criteria to get to a consensus around what constitutes best fit, i.e. geographic boundaries, election districts, population diversity, etc. Then, once the census data becomes available, the Commission would have a general consensus about how to start drawing districts.

Dare Thompson commented she can't imagine undertaking this task without software.

Cynthia Lowe: Q./ When do we need to make a decision about the purchase? A./ Within the next 30 days before the trial runs out.

Vernon Benjamin commented that he believes the Planning Department should move forward with obtaining the software.

Bill West said there are other available options the Commission needs to consider.

Cynthia Lowe and Vernon Benjamin were in agreement that any software recommendation should come from the County Planning Department, the experts who are available to the Commission. If the program doesn't integrate with the software the County currently has, then there could be several issues including wasting a lot of time justifying if the information produced is correct or not.

Paul Benkert: Q./ Is there other software that can work with what the County currently has? A./ Rob Leibowitz: I believe there are stand-alone versions that are data driven and don't visualize the maps. They are essentially just databases that crunch the numbers. I'm not fully aware of what's out there yet.

Dennis Doyle said if asked to evaluate the best program he suspects they would look for the ability to bring in other criteria that the Commission decides is important to the decision process into that package, election districts, different barriers, etc.

Dare Thompson would like to add ethnicity of populations as a criteria item. She believes it is a basic thing to look at in the redistricting process. Dare is currently unfamiliar with the communities of interest in UC, where they are, and what the Commission should be trying to protect.

Rob Leibowitz showed that ethnic breakdown can be illustrated for consideration when using the demoed software.

Rob Leibowitz pointed out that the Census produces its mapping data directly to the ArcGIS format.

Sylvia Wohlfahrt recommended that the Commission define the pieces of information that it will use in the decision making process and gather the criteria in a requirements document and present it to the other vendors that have this product. The vendors come back with proposals to evaluate. This Request-For-Quote process is very quick. The Commission can have proposals within a couple of weeks of getting your criteria.

The Commission agreed to move forward with the process Sylvia suggested.

- Sylvia Wohlfahrt, Commission Website

The website can be a link off of the existing County website for a nominal fee.

Sylvia requested input from the Commission on the types of things the Commissioners would like to see on the website and the level of interactivity the Commission would like to have with the public.

Bill West: Q./ The Charter Commission had a website. What did they have on their site? A./ Sylvia: Just documents, agendas, and things of that nature.

There was discussion amongst the Commissioners as to whether the website should provide an opportunity for the public to post comments.

Sylvia said typically when you accept information back you take on a large responsibility of monitoring the content you get to make sure there is nothing offensive, or what gets put out there is not perceived as your opinion. It is certainly much easier if the Commission has complete control of what gets posted on the site.

Rob Leibowitz suggested using the website for dissemination purposes only, and list easily identifiable contact information for those who want to share something with the Commission.

Sylvia went on to recommend posting agendas, calendars, minutes, links to maps, status updates of what the Commission is currently working on, and a contact e-mail address (which can be set up as a group so that each Commissioner receives the e-mail).

Dare Thompson suggested taking time to think about the idea of the public posting comments or blogging and revisiting the topic at the next meeting. She would like to see as much public input as possible. There may be a way to do it so that the person needs to identify him/herself. Everything you read about redistricting talks about transparency and as open a process as possible, as much back and forth as possible. It's only done once every 10 years. This is not a small question.

The Commissioners agreed to think about the issue of blogging/public comment on the website and revisit the topic at the next meeting.

The Commissioners agreed to have Vicky be the liaison between Sylvia and the Commission for the purposes of providing information pertaining to the website.

There was discussion about the website containing a short bio on each Commissioner, including town where the individual resides. Short bios should be e-mailed to Vicky.

- Public Comment Venues

Bill West suggested considering meeting with Town Boards at their public meetings. There will be an audience and there is existing structure to those meetings- people are aware of them and we can be placed on the agenda. For the initial go-around it may be the best way to encourage public participation.

The Commission agreed that it was a good idea to attend the Town Board Meetings to get input from the Supervisors and Board Members. Vicky will reach out to all the Town Supervisors and Mayor Sottile to see if there is interest and map out a schedule of when the meetings are.

The Commission reviewed a list of eleven potential venues around the County where public hearings can be held. (See handout: Potential Venues, Commission on Reapportionment Public Hearings)

Bill West suggested reviewing the list of venues but holding off on picking locations until the Commission hears back from the Town Supervisors and also first schedules a meeting for input from the Legislature.

- Meeting with the Legislature

Bill West said the purpose of meeting with the Legislature was to introduce the Commission as a group and ask for concerns, interests and input.

Michael Catalinotto reiterated the County Charter says "allow timely input from the County Legislature and its members."

The Commissioner's reviewed the Legislative Calendar for the month of February and decided that it would be most convenient to meet with the Legislative Body on the day of Session, February 15, 2011, as all Legislators would already be planning on coming to the building for their monthly meeting.

The Commissioners agreed to have Vicky send a request to the Majority and Minority Leaders saying the Commission is available on Feb. 15th- is it possible to meet with the Legislative Body on that evening and if so what time would you suggest. Vicky will take their recommendation to Chairman Wadnola for official approval.

- Preparation for Meetings

Bill West asked the Commission if there were any handouts or informational material the Commissioners thought should be developed for distribution at any of the public meetings, i.e. a copy of the section of the Charter that discusses the Commission on Reapportionment.

Paul Benkert recommended directing individuals to the County Website to view the Charter if they have any questions.

Cynthia Lowe said the Commission wants the public to be aware that the Commission itself has a website.

Bill West suggested making a sign for display at public hearings that says you can find up to date information about the Commission and the reapportionment process at _____ (web address).

Vernon Benjamin suggested creating a pamphlet similar to the one the Executive created re: the Esopus Creek water problem. It should have info on the Commission, what is it, what are we supposed to do, some details about it, where we are going to meet, etc. The Commission agreed that after the website is created, it should be relatively easy to cut and paste the info into a handout format.

Dare Thompson explained to the Commissioners that many government groups across the county worked together to develop the following essential principles which represent a long-term national effort to reach consensus on how best to tackle redistricting:

1. An accurate and complete count in Census 2010 is an essential building block for all redistricting efforts.
2. The process used for redistricting must be transparent to the public.
3. The redistricting process, at all levels of government, must provide data, tools and opportunities for the public to have direct input into the specific plans under consideration by the redistricting body.
4. In order to achieve representative democracy, redistricting plans must be drawn in a manner that allows elected bodies to reflect the diversity of the populace, especially racial and ethnic diversity.

Dare will send out the background to this summary to all the Commissioners to review. Dare believes these 4 principles should be listed on all of the Commission's literature, including the website.

- New Business

The Commission agreed that Dare will correspond with the Planning Department and report back to the Commission re: any info the Planning Department may have that will give the Commission insight to the diversity of the County.

Discussion ensued re: number of enrolled voters and where incumbents live not criteria for decision making.

The Commission expressed concern about the final plan adoption by the Legislature. The Commissioners are eagerly waiting on the official opinion from Legislative Counsel regarding this issue.

The Commissioners agreed that their meeting with the Legislature would inaugurate their road trip. At the next meeting the Commission will discuss and schedule meetings around the County.

- Adjournment:

A motion was made by Michael Catalinotto to adjourn the meeting, Seconded by Rich Messina, with all in favor. Carried. The meeting was adjourned at 4:45 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,

Victoria Fabella, Deputy Clerk, Ulster County Legislature