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Advocates: W.Mass. wants to keep its representation

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The consensus of the more than a dozen people testifying Tuesday before the Special Joint Legislative Committee on Redistricting called on the panel to retain both western Massachusetts Congressional districts.

Nine members of the 28-member panel attended the two-hour session at Greenfield Community College, with about 50 people present from the four western counties. Among those at Tuesday's sixth of 13 scheduled hearings statewide were Co-Chairman Sen. Stanley Rosenberg, D-Amherst, and state Rep. Stephen Kulik, D-Worthington.

Testimony from U.S. Congressman John W. Olver, D-Amherst, was presented by an aide, who pointed out that five of the senior members of the state's current delegation have key positions on powerful committees: Energy and Commerce, Ways and Means, Financial Services, Appropriations and Rules.

"It is also true that the First District," which Olver represents, "encompasses 107 of the state's 351 communities, is by far the largest geographically and is substantially rural compared to other districts," he said.

With a multitude of small towns spread over a large area, the district has many shared interests among communities along the Route 2 corridor and within the Hilltowns: "appropriate rural transportation, community health centers, expanded broadband and an ethic that promotes environmental protection and tourism."

A survey of 36 Franklin County select board members and Council of Governments Advisory Board members, presented by COG Executive Director Linda Dunlavy, showed that 68 percent wanted regional school districts to be identified as "communities of interest" within individual legislative districts - a notion advocated also by Keith McCormic of the Greenfield School Committee.

"While Franklin County is a strong, unified region, there are shared characteristics among smaller

sub-regions of the county," Dunlavy said. "Forty-two percent of respondents believe that if and when Franklin County is divided" - as it already is, into four state House and three state Senate districts - it's important to keep the sub-regions intact: west, east, north and south.

Asked if they would prefer four representatives - even if three predominantly serve a neighboring county - or fewer representatives where the focus is Franklin County, 77 percent believe the region could be better served by fewer representatives, she said.

Also, 65 percent of the survey's respondents said western Massachusetts would be better served by two congressional districts than one.

Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority also said that having two members of Congress to serve the four western counties would better represent the interests of rural and small communities.

"It's always a bit of a challenge to get the needs of rural and small communities across to the Department of Housing and Urban Development because they're used to dealing with housing projects that are bigger than our towns and housing authorities that are bigger than our county. There's an unfortunate perception among some people at HUD that poverty has an urban face and that people who live in rural communities don't have serious housing problems."

In addition to calling for the First and Second districts to survive the needed elimination of one of the state's 10 districts, those testifying called for reconfiguration of state legislative districts to better reflect "communities of common interest," an end to prison-based gerrymandering and for the Fifth Congressional District to be retained so that the state's only woman U.S. representative - Niki Tsongas - can keep her seat.

"Every time we have redistricting, Berkshire County moves a little further into Franklin County," said Michael Slowinski, of Colrain, pointing to the effect that Berkshire's declining population has on districts here. "The people in Berkshire County are good people, but they don't understand our needs How you people are going to solve this conundrum, I don't know. ... It's always shifting, shifting, and it disenfranchises western Franklin County."

Two committee members, House Co-Chairman Michael Moran, of Brighton, and state Rep. Patricia Haddad, of Somerset, disagreed that Franklin County legislative candidates can't be elected in districts dominated by Berkshire County towns.

"It's not about the who," said Haddad. "We have to look at how we divvy up the population and the land mass, not so far somebody might have to go in their district."

Peter Wagner, executive director of the Prison Policy Initiative, advocates for the Census Bureau to stop counting incarcerated corrections and prison populations as if they were residents of the communities where those correctional facilities are located.

"When legislative bodies use Census counts of correctional facilities to draw legislative districts," he said, "they unintentionally grant extra representation to those districts and dilute the votes of every resident of every district without a large prison."

The Legislature is allowed discretion equal to 5 percent of a state legislative district's population, which Wagner said should be used to offset the weight of those inmate populations.

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