



Testimony

House State Government
Committee Hearing on
House Bills 55, 644 and 867
(Reduction in Size of General Assembly)

August 19, 2008
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Offered by
John J. Bell, Governmental Affairs Counsel
PENNSYLVANIA FARM BUREAU

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau

510 S. 31st Street • P.O. Box 8736 • Camp Hill, PA 17001-8736 • (717) 761-2740

Good morning Chairwoman Josephs and members of the House State Government Committee. I am John Bell, and I am Governmental Affairs Counsel for Pennsylvania Farm Bureau. On behalf of Pennsylvania Farm Bureau and more than 44,000 farm and rural families who are members of Farm Bureau, I want to thank you for providing our organization the opportunity to offer our views on legislation to reduce the number of state Senate and House districts in Pennsylvania.

Certainly, notions of “political reform” in Pennsylvania generally and “reform of the General Assembly” in particular have gained significant popularity in recent years. Times have been troubling for many Pennsylvanians, and this situation has created a growing unrest among citizens of the Commonwealth regarding the degree of concern and responsiveness of state government to the needs and problems of its constituents.

Substantial political unrest often leads to cries for sweeping changes in the current system in which our government and our legislature functions. But the potential danger in impulsive responses to these cries is a “cure” that is politically worse than the “evil” the cure is attempting to remedy.

Farm Bureau believes that any reduction in the number of legislative districts in the General Assembly would worsen, not improve, the functions of the legislature and its ability to truly represent all interests of the Commonwealth.

We would note that during this legislative term the General Assembly and the House of Representatives took two significant steps to improve the function and accountability of the legislature and the legislative process. The General Assembly enacted a new Right-to-Know Law, which broadly expanded the types of documents and other “public records” that are accessible to the public, including records produced in the course of legislative decision-making. And the House of Representatives also revised its procedural rules to make it more difficult for the use of procedural tactics that many found to be counterproductive to fair and effective consideration of proposed legislation in the House.

But measures to “improve efficiency” in our legislature government should not come at a cost of seriously compromising existing opportunities for needs and concerns of local Pennsylvanians to be meaningfully heard and represented in the legislative process. Whether or not the sentiment is justified, many citizens have become alienated by the workings

of their government and are pessimistic that their needs and concerns are being seriously considered and addressed.

We believe that legislation to reduce the number of districts and increase the population being represented by each district will further erode meaningful participation of constituents and representation and advocacy of their interests in the legislative process, particularly in rural Pennsylvania.

Farm and rural communities have some legitimate reasons for being concerned about what further dilution of representation in the General Assembly may mean for them. Pennsylvania's population numbers clearly show that farmers make up a small minority of Pennsylvania's population. The 2002 Agricultural Census estimates that 85,000 farmers are operating 58,000 farms in Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania's farm population is only 0.7 percent of Pennsylvania's total population of 12.2 million estimated for 2000 under the U.S. Census.

According to population estimates reported in the *Pennsylvania Abstract*, between 1990 and 2000, Pennsylvania's rural population declined by nearly 875 thousand, while Pennsylvania's urban population increased by more than 1.25

million. During this time, the relative percentage of Pennsylvania's population living in rural areas declined from 31 percent from 23 percent.

This is a significant decline, and has already affected the demographic make-up of many legislative districts in the Commonwealth. Because of these changes in population demographics, there has already been a considerable geographic shift in legislative districts toward urban areas and away from farming and rural areas. We anticipate this trend to continue.

Court interpretations of the United States Constitution essentially prohibit Pennsylvania and other states from establishing legislative districts on the basis of geographical regions. State legislative districts must be established on the basis of relative equality of populations in each district. Yet the forefathers of the federal Constitution recognized the wisdom in creating a bicameral legislature whose representation is based both on geography and population to better ensure that needs and interests of citizens living in less populated regions will be expressed and considered in Congress.

Although Pennsylvania may not have the legal ability to structure legislative representation exclusively on geography, the bicameral system with more numerous districts representing smaller numbers of people, better ensures that the interests of less densely populated areas do not get left behind in exercise of democracy, and that legislative action does not merely become a tyranny of the majority.

Generally speaking, House Bills 55, 644 and 867 would propose to reduce the number of legislative districts for the House of Representatives and Senate by at least 20 percent. As we understand, if a 20 percent reduction were to occur, based on the population estimated under the 2000 census, the number of people being represented by each Senatorial district would increase by about 49,000, from 246,000 to 295,000. And the number of people being represented by each House district would increase by about 12,000, from 60,000 to 72,000 people per district.

Such changes would seriously hurt the opportunity for those in rural areas to have a meaningful voice in our Commonwealth's business. Not only would this increase the likelihood of shifting representation away from rural communities, the fewer districts remaining in rural areas would

likely be larger in size, making it even more difficult and time-consuming for those representing these districts to adequately serve their constituents.

For these reasons and others, Pennsylvania Farm Bureau's members have adopted the policy position that the number of legislative districts in the Pennsylvania General Assembly remain at 50 in the Senate and 203 in the House of Representatives. We therefore would not support legislative proposals to reduce the size of the General Assembly contained in House Bills 55, 644 and 867, and would urge this Committee not to report these bills or similar legislation from committee.

Again, we thank you for the opportunity to share with you our views. I will try to answer any questions you may have.