

## Testimony for PA Redistricting

October 12, 2021

Wellsboro Fire Hall

Dear members of the PA State Government Committee,

Thank you for considering my testimony about the 2021 process of redistricting Congressional Districts in Pennsylvania and the redistricting process in general in our state. I have been a voter for 56 years, worked at the Election polls for 4 years, a retired teacher of 29 years, a US Census Enumerator for the 2010 and 2020 Census, a registered Republican....and a Sunday School teacher.

When you are finally in the map drawing process, I have two requests. There is a time limit when the final district maps need to be approved. In 2011 the maps were presented to the public so close to the deadline that there was, in effect, no time to modify the maps after public input. 1. Present the maps to the public with enough time for modifications to be made. 2. Start with a clean map. Consider the needs of the people over the needs of the incumbents.

I'm going to speak to you about the citizens of Tioga County and their feelings about the redistricting process from my experiences during the last three years.

Prior to 2018 I felt that our Representatives and Senators were Pennsylvanians before they were a member of a political party, just as I felt. I had never seen a Representative's email with their name connected with a D or an R in their address until the last decade. That surprised me but I soon became aware and very concerned with the extremely partisan process of governing, as opposed to "this is what we need to do for the good of our State and of the country. In the Senate and House of Representatives in PA and our US Congressional system in Washington D.C. the gridlock and polarization has been frustrating and frightening for a concerned citizenry to see. About this time I became aware of the highly partisan drawing of district lines after the 2010 census. It was a process of politicians choosing their own voters. I have become convinced that the results of that extremely partisan process have been grossly detrimental to responsible governing in Pennsylvania and the US.

I became aware of a grassroots group of Pennsylvanians who, not only wanted to change the system, but they had a plan to put in the old process's place. An Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission made sense to me. There were four other like minded Tioga County Citizens who had the same idea. We were a nonpartisan group of two Republicans and three Democrats, two men and three women. We decided to visit every township and borough in Tioga Co, show them the 2011 gerrymandered maps and explain the new redistricting and constitutional amendment process. We had a resolution for them to sign that showed support for a more fair, accountable and transparent system of redistricting.

We visited all 39 townships and boroughs at least once, sometimes twice and occasionally three times using our own considerable time, effort and money. More than half signed the petition representing over 50% of the population of Tioga County. There would have been more signees if we had returned to their meetings but due to the timing of the constitutional amendment process for an Independent

Citizens Commission we had to concentrate on that. We presented our data to the Tioga County and neighboring Commissioners, State representatives and Senators. We held educational public meetings, did radio talk shows, wrote letters to the editor, spoke to school classes, had booths at town festivals and held community meeting throughout the County. Hundreds of thousands of people throughout Pennsylvania signed petitions expressing their support of a new process of redistricting. Everyone, except for the politicians, looked at the maps and listened to the facts and agreed that the process, as written in our Constitution resulted in extremely gerrymandered maps. There needed to be more guardrails for drawing the maps or a new process. After we presented our data to our legislators, we heard nothing.

In addition, Franklin and Marshall College, chose the redistricting question for its prestigious statewide poll in 2019. Independent, Republican, Democratic and Other registered voters responded to the random survey. The results showed that "Pennsylvania voters are clear that the current redistricting process is designed to maximize party influence, minimize accountability and reduce competition." Seventy two, (72%), percent of the respondents said that "the current system of drawing legislative districts in PA allows party leaders to put party interests ahead of voters' interests." Seventy, (70%), percent said that it "creates polarizations and gridlock". Sixty five, (65%), percent said it allows elected officials to choose their own voters instead of voters choosing their elected officials." Sixty two, (62%), said "it gives voters less choice on Election Day". Sixty one, (61%), said that it "prevents voters from holding their representatives accountable".

After this data was presented and explained to our legislators, we heard nothing.

During this three year process there were various chairmen of the Senate and House Government Committees where, as you know, the bills have to originate and be sponsored before a vote can be taken on the floor. Representative Garth Everett wrote to me explaining his position, not for an Independent Citizens Commission, but that, any group could produce fair, accountable and transparent districts if they were given the appropriate criteria. He had a list of criteria that matched closely with those defined in the position from the grassroots organization Fair Districts PA. However, no bill ever came, that expressed his criteria, to the House Floor for a vote. Senator Argall is an opponent of gerrymandering and has been for a long time, if I understand his position correctly. And now we are in a hearing for Congressional redistricting. There is nothing that has been written in a bill or constitutional amendment from this Legislative Session, with Rep. Seth Grove as chairman, that will guide commissions in the next decade. The Redistricting Commission for the PA Senate and House of Representatives is using the same criteria that are currently in our PA Constitution that were so twisted and convoluted in their interpretation in 2011 that we ended up with "Goofy kicking Donald" and the national reputation as being one of the most extremely gerrymandered states in the union. Where are the bills or laws that would prevent this situation from happening again?

Thank you for having a hearing on this important topic. You scheduled it in a town on US Route 6 that is on the border of two very large geographic districts so that the constituents of those districts would only have to drive 3-4+ hours to attend this meeting. Since it was scheduled for 4 pm anyone who wants to testify need only take off a half day of work. Having the Hearing information only on a partisan website

as well as having incorrect information on that website gave some constituents of Districts 5 and 10 the feeling that the hearing is a token meeting designed to limit their participation.

Often we hear and read politicians talking about “the will of the people”. I have witnessed the “will of the people” for three years expressing their legitimate displeasure with the current redistricting process and watched our legislators ignore them. We have no referendum process in PA where the true “will of the people” could be registered.

I thank you for providing this opportunity for me to express my experiences and thoughts with you this afternoon. I wish you well in your map drawing and that in the end we will judge your process and maps as being accountable, fair, transparent and responsive to the needs of the citizens of Pennsylvania. There are a lot of people who have been drawing and redrawing really good, nonbiased, responsive district maps who would be happy to share their maps and their expertise with you- Draw the Maps participants, Fair District PA map drawers, Council of Seventy people, Dave’s Maps, League of Women Voters...

In a democracy, it’s important that every voting citizen knows that his/her vote counts.

Sincerely,

Janet Miles Gyekis

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Sources:

Personal data –resolutions from townships and boroughs of Tioga County

Franklin and Marshall Statewide Opinion Poll

Fair Districts PA

Response letter to me from Rep. Garth Everett

Records from the PA Senate and House of Representatives

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