

## **Testimony of Ardith Talbott (Southeast Regional Hearing)**

Thank you, Representative Grove and committee members for this opportunity. I've lived in Pennsylvania 46 years, first in Philadelphia and now in Bucks County, and I've been a property owner Northampton County. In my 30-year career doing market research for consumer products and pharmaceuticals I've studied many communities of interest and maps. I am a member of the League of Women Voters and am active in the chamber of commerce. I've worked for over 5 years to ensure fair voting districts, meeting with legislators, writing letters to the editor, and collecting petition signatures from Republicans and Democrats. I am here today representing my own views and not those of any organization.

As you well know, the 2020 census shows that Pennsylvania has grown only 2.4% in the last decade, resulting in the loss of one congressional seat. However, the 7-county region in southeastern Pennsylvania grew 5.3%, led by growth in Lehigh County of 7.2%. Population growth in this region is twice the growth rate of the state overall. By population, this 7-county Southeast region should have 5 of the 17 congressional districts.

The state is becoming less rural and more urban and suburban; and this is also true in this 7-county southeastern region. The strong population growth in the 7-county area is driven especially by growth in the Hispanic population (+48%). The Hispanic population in the region has reached 406,000, about the size of Bucks County which is the 4th largest county in the state. The Hispanic population is concentrated in three counties ---Berks, Lehigh and Northampton. The Black population in the 7-county region is 404,000, up +24%, and is concentrated in Delaware County.

I am here to ask you to draw districts that accomplish three things. First, we need to create congressional districts that meet the federal requirements of having equal population and creating majority minority districts where possible to comply with the Voting Rights Act. Second, even where minority communities are not sufficiently large to constitute a majority district, the Hispanic and Black communities in the Southeast are large, growing and compact and should be fairly represented. In other words, I ask that the voting power of those communities not be diluted by dividing them. Third, I ask you to draw congressional districts that fairly represent both Democrats and Republics in the state, versus gerrymandering the districts to serve the interests of a particular candidate or party. The current congressional districts were a major improvement in terms of partisan fairness. We know it can be done, and fair districts will help restore public faith in the democratic process.

Now I'd like to speak to a map of Pennsylvania congressional districts and focus on 4 districts in the Southeast. Here is a link to the map. <https://davesredistricting.org/join/4f1c5ae4-d850-42c0-8237-3bfbbed3e77ce>

First, looking at Berks, Lehigh and Northampton counties. The district I am describing is the district in the teal color on the map, also called District 6. It is possible to have one congressional district of exactly the right population that includes Easton, Bethlehem, Allentown and Reading. I realize this is a big change from how the district is currently drawn. But consider the following facts.

-Hispanics represent 69% of Reading, 54% of Allentown, 29% of Bethlehem, and 26% of Easton. Some of the municipalities around these cities, such as Whitehall Township, have also had tremendous growth in their Hispanic populations. Erika Sutherland, a Muhlenberg College Spanish professor, said the Lehigh Valley's growing Hispanic population is also increasingly highly educated and actively participates in politics.

-It takes little more than one hour to drive from Easton to Reading so the district is compact by the well-traveled Route 78 and Rout 222. It is called the 222 corridor.

-It would cover 72% of the total population of Berks, Lehigh and Northampton counties.

- Many large and small corporations are headquartered in this district, and they are creating jobs and generating population growth. Amtrak plans two new passenger rail lines, one to Reading and one to Allentown, as a result of population growth.

--As this district continues to experience strong industrial and population growth, the region will need federal support for infrastructure improvements, including roads and airports, and expansion of other public services for working families.

-This region is an economic growth engine in the state and as such it would benefit the state as well as the region to have a congressional representative devoted to its interests. This district would have a minority population of 36%, not a majority, but reflective of the significant Hispanic population. According to DRA, the district would lean slightly to democrats with 55% of VAP.

Now shift your attention to the Northern tier of these 3 counties. That is the district colored in yellow on the map; district 5. This is home to the other 25% of the 3-county population. This area tends to be more rural and newly suburban than district 6, more white. This district would need to be combined with neighboring counties to constitute a congressional district. In this map, this area is combined with counties to the North. Republicans would have a slight majority in this district of 51% VAP, but basically it would be competitive.

Now, moving southward to Bucks County and Montgomery County. The map shows two congressional districts in blue and green. The two counties have a combined population of 1.5 million, equivalent to 2 congressional districts. Both of these counties tend to have older suburban Philadelphia communities, as well as new suburban development, served by SEPTA commuter rail service to Philadelphia. And there are shrinking rural communities in the North. Bucks and Montgomery counties are two of the top 5 most populous counties in Pennsylvania. They are connected by a long border and they currently share one congressional representative. The boundaries of the Blue district, which is mostly Bucks County, are very close to the current district boundaries. In terms of partisan lean, this would be a competitive district. The boundaries of the green district which is mainly Montgomery County are also very close to the current lines. This district leans democrat. (59% VAP)

Those four congressional districts are the ones I will address today.

To summarize, I ask 3 things: Of course the map must meet the constitutional requirements; second: create a district that will provide the maximum support of the fast growing, multicultural region in the Lower part of Berks, Lehigh and Northampton Counties to sustain the vibrant population and economy there; and third, draw a statewide map that fairly represents the Democrats and Republicans for the next 10 years.

I look forward to seeing a preliminary Congressional map that you will propose in the next 6 weeks, and having the opportunity again to offer comment.

Here is a link to an article in the Morning Call, newspaper of the Lehigh Valley.

<https://www.mcall.com/news/local/mcnws-demographic-changes-lehigh-valley-municipalities-20210816-kxzdrrsbecdpa6r6drbcq2ka-story.html>

Here is a link to the Demographic analysis I did based on 2020 Census Data for the 7-counties in the Southeast. <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Uac4-NPQYvmK4YRVQHcQcMIUg1zAg7a979r1UDGgimU/edit?usp=sharing>