

Redistricting Testimony-Pennsylvania House State Government Committee

By Deirdre Gibson

I'm a life-long resident of Pennsylvania and have lived in McKean, Bucks, Centre, Philadelphia, and now Delaware County. I worked for 50 years both in the private sector and the federal government in large-scale land planning, and I have extensive experience in conducting public processes around decisions that would affect the lives and well-being of citizens.

I mention this because my testimony today concerns the mechanics of the public process that will lead to the development of new congressional maps for Pennsylvania districts.

I was encouraged to hear the committee promise to conduct the "most transparent" redistricting process to date. Representative Benninghoff stated on July 12 that "the coming slate of hearings, the publicly accessible website and the ability for Pennsylvanians to submit their own maps and communities of interest clearly makes this effort the most transparent Congressional redistricting in Pennsylvania history. The work that will be put into this by the House State Government Committee shows our caucus' commitment to a process-oriented approach that is reflective of the people's voice."

The series of public hearings the committee is holding is an encouraging first step, and I've followed with interest the testimony that citizens have taken the time to prepare and provide to you. However, taking testimony and posting it on a website is only a first step toward your promise of a transparent and reflective process. Since July 12, I've been waiting to hear more about the process, and I'm concerned that the rest of it is missing and/or completely opaque. It's regrettable that there is no law, standard, or even precedent in Pennsylvania for a truly transparent and reflective public process, because this puts you in the difficult-to-defend position of making this up as you go along. Yet hundreds, if not thousands, of transparent public processes are conducted each year in the U.S. and the steps are well accepted and effective. May I suggest some steps that will define what "transparency" comprises, and that will produce a result that the public can feel confident of, particularly since public confidence is one of the committee's stated goals?

1. Provide a timeline for your work.
 - ☐ State what the target dates are for release of the initial draft map, for public review, and for submission to the governor.

The recent month-long delay in the scheduling of half of the public hearings is a concern, and certainly leads to the question of whether and how the testimony will be used in decision-making. A timeline would help to assuage this concern.

2. Make the process responsive and interactive, rather than one-way.

Again, limiting the process to simply taking and posting testimony means that information is only flowing in one direction, and without a visible result. Surprisingly, committee members who have traveled to the remote locations of the hearings are not even asking questions of the citizens who have taken the time to appear.

☐ "Transparent and reflective" means that the committee will clarify how the information that citizens have provided will be used in the committee's work.

Note how the information is being documented, both qualitatively and quantitatively, so that you'll have the ability to use it in your work.

Prepare and publish a summary set of conclusions that you have reached based on the compendium of testimony.

3. Clarify what criteria are being used.

Clarify whether the House State Government Committee has committed to using the criteria provided by the U.S. Constitution and the Voting Rights Act as the key criteria for developing the map.

Clarify whether there are additional criteria that you will use as guidelines. State the priority order of importance of the criteria.

4. Clarify who is involved in decision making.

Describe the process through which the HSGC will work with the SSGC.

Clarify how minority members of the committee and legislature will be included in map-making. Are you willing to commit to an inclusive process in which amendments offered by other legislators will be presented to the public in a timely way and, most importantly, receive a vote?

Disclose the name and qualifications of any vendor or other consultant who is drawing the map.

5. Build in time for actual reflection.

"Reflective" means that there will be a dialogue between the legislature and the public. The legislature was unhappy when the state supreme court handed down a map in 2018 with no consultation. The public will be unhappy if you do the same thing this year.

Ensure that you build in a minimum of thirty days for the public to review and comment on the initial draft map.

Present the draft map in a publicly accessible and user-friendly format such as Dave's Redistricting app to make commenting easy.

Ensure that you have time to incorporate the comments you'll receive and to make needed changes.

6. Show your work.

"Transparency" means that the question "why" is fully answered.

Provide a written report to accompany both the initial draft map and the final submitted map that describes how and why decisions were made for each district.

Conclusion

Few public processes provide outcomes that make everyone happy. Yet a well-run, fully transparent, interactive process will give the public confidence that this outcome is honest, responsive, and as fair as possible.

As Representative Grove stated on July 12, "At a time when public trust in government is low, it is vital that the voices of the people are heard." Representative Grove and members of this committee, Pennsylvanians want you to follow through and meet the commitment you made.