



IN THE KNOW: DRAWING COUNCIL'S DISTRICT LINES

Lurking quietly behind the deadlines for approving the city's budget and finalizing the details of a small financial lifeline to the Philadelphia School District is another significant deadline for Philadelphia City Council: redrawing the boundaries of the city's ten Council districts.

City Council has *six months* after the U.S. Census Bureau publishes the city's population figures to redraw the district lines. If this doesn't get done, Council members don't get paid.

Philadelphians learned the census results on March 9, 2011.

On June 16, 2011, a resolution was introduced in City Council to get the show on the road. It is on Council's calendar for final passage on Thursday, June 23.

Traditionally, redistricting is done by incumbent politicians who are anxious to protect their seats and discourage competitive elections. And, in Philadelphia at least, the process has unfolded behind closed doors and without public input.

The June 16 resolution calls for an "open and transparent process and opportunity for public engagement and input." If this happens, it will be a breath of fresh air.

But time is running out.

The non-partisan Committee of Seventy, which fights for better local government, has some ideas to help Council meet its six month deadline. Back in March, we proposed a 15-step plan for citywide redistricting that guarantees more transparency and fairness to city voters than has existed in the past. You can read it at: [http://www.seventy.org/Downloads/2011 Local Redistricting.pdf](http://www.seventy.org/Downloads/2011%20Local%20Redistricting.pdf).

In the meantime, this **IN THE KNOW** will give you some background to help you understand the redistricting process. We'll also give you some tips on how to get your voice heard.

- June 22, 2011

Why are we talking about redistricting now?

The Philadelphia Home Rule Charter – the city's governing document – requires City Council to redraw the boundaries of its 10 districts within six months after U.S. Census Bureau releases information on the city's population. The Census Bureau does this every 10 years. The last time redistricting was done was in 2001; the next time will be in 2021.



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So this is the year for redistricting?

Yes. Remember the census form you filled out last year? The Census Bureau took the information from everyone's forms and came up with very detailed statistics on who lives in Philadelphia – all across the city down to specific neighborhoods and even individual blocks. The information can be sliced and diced many different ways, including by ethnicity, race, age and gender. This data is used for many purposes, including for redistricting.

When was the census released?

Philadelphia got the census results on March 9, 2011.

Why does it matter what district I live in?

Because City Council has a say in virtually everything that goes on in Philadelphia – taxes, city services, jobs, even what gets built here. If you've been following the news about the School District's \$629 million budget hole, you know that it was up to Council to decide whether or not to give the public schools more money. If you have a problem doing business with the city, or if you just want to express your opinion, chances are your district Council member is the person you go to.

I'm about to get a new district Council member. Will that person be involved in redistricting?

Redistricting will be done by the *current* members of Council. What's interesting is that at least six Council members who will be drawing district lines that will be in place until the next redistricting happens in 2021 are leaving after their terms end in January 2012. Four of the six represent Council districts. (The outcome of the Council elections on November 8 could result in more new members.)

Does the Charter tell Council how to do redistricting?

Not really. The Charter says only that each of the ten Council districts must have "as nearly as possible" the same number of people. The Charter also says that the each district shall "consist of a ward or contiguous wards."

Why does it matter if each district has the same number of people?

So that no one person's vote counts more than another person's vote.

That makes sense. How many people are in each district?

The city's population is a little over 1.5 million – 1,526,006 to be exact. Each of the 10 Council districts has give-or-take 150,000 people (1.5 million divided by 10).

What does "ward or contiguous wards" mean?

A ward is a political division. Philadelphia is divided into 66 wards. (Each ward can have anywhere from 10-50 divisions). Contiguous wards must share a boundary. That means a Council district can't have one ward in Northeast Philadelphia and another ward in Southwest Philadelphia. If a Council district contains more than one ward – and all of them do – the wards must "touch" one another.



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If the current Council districts have the right number of people – and the wards are contiguous – why change anything?

Since the census comes out only every 10 years, there are always shifts in population. Some districts gain residents; others lose them. The boundaries may not move much – and maybe not at all. But usually some changes need to happen.

Are there any particular problems with the current districts?

Actually, yes. A 2006 study by Avazea (formerly Avencia) rated Philadelphia's Fifth and Seventh Council districts among the top ten most unfairly drawn local districts in the country. That's right – *in the country*.

That's embarrassing. How did the study figure this out?

A key measure of the fairness of districts are how "compact" they are. Neither the city Charter or Pennsylvania's Constitution define "compactness." According to Avazea, compactness is usually measured by looking at the geometric shape of a district and comparing it to a perfectly compact shape, like a circle.

So I guess that means the Fifth and Seventh Council districts aren't circles, right?

Exactly. Take a look for yourself:

http://www.seventy.org/Downloads/Political_Maps/City_Council_Map/City_Council_District_5.pdf

http://www.seventy.org/Downloads/Political_Maps/City_Council_Map/City_Council_District_7.pdf

Is this what people call gerrymandering?

Gerrymandering refers to a process where district lines are deliberately drawn in order to achieve a specific political outcome. If the shape of a district is very odd – as they are in the Fifth and Seventh districts – they tend to be characterized as "gerrymandered" districts. (By the way, the term "gerrymander" was coined by a reporter who described a district drawn by Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry in 1812 as a salamander.)

How can district lines be drawn to achieve a certain outcome?

Saving incumbents is an open secret in redistricting. Lines can be drawn to keep potential challengers – or constituencies – outside the district. Or to keep voters who belong to the same political party as the incumbent inside the district. Legend has it that a former politician realized his days in the U.S. Congress were numbered when his house ended up in one district and his garage in another.

You said something before about Council not getting paid. Is this for real?

It's very real. The Charter gives Council six months to come up with a redistricting plan. If this doesn't happen, they stop getting paid until a plan is in place.

Have Council members ever lost their paychecks over redistricting?

Yes, in 1991 and 2001 – the last two times redistricting was required. Former Councilman Rick Mariano blamed his conviction for corruption on the fact that he needed money when he lost his salary after Council and then-Mayor John Street couldn't agree on the 2001 redistricting plan.



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That was my next question: Does the mayor have a role in redistricting?

Yes, at the tail end of the process. After Council passes a redistricting plan, it goes to the mayor. If he approves it, the plan becomes law. If he vetoes it, the plan goes back to Council. Unless Council has 12 votes to override his veto, they have to go back to the drawing board and come up with another plan. There is a third option: the mayor can do nothing (neither approve nor veto the redistricting plan). In that case, the plan passed by Council becomes law.

Doesn't it make sense to involve the mayor at the front end of the redistricting process?

The Committee of Seventy thinks so. The 15-step plan we recommended to guide Council's redistricting process calls for getting input from Mayor Nutter early in the redistricting process and throughout Council's deliberations on the plan. It would be better for everyone if the two sides can reach a consensus to avoid what happened in 1991 and 2001.

What else does the Committee of Seventy's plan say?

We thought you'd never ask. Seventy recommended that all 17 members of Council (the 10 district members and the seven at-large members, who represent citywide voters) form a Redistricting Committee to decide how the redistricting process will happen, conduct hearings in each of the ten Council districts and keep the public up-to-date on the redistricting process on its website.

Why do the at-large members have a say in redistricting?

Although the at-large members don't represent districts, their job is to look out for the interests of all city voters. And their vote on redistricting has the same weight as the vote of a district Council member.

Does Council's resolution agree with Seventy's plan?

Council's resolution calls for "public community based hearings to educate and inform citizens on the redistricting process and opportunity in order to create an open and transparent opportunity for public engagement and input for City Council's consideration." But it doesn't give any specifics on what this means or Council's timetable.

If redistricting is all about who represents me, shouldn't I have a say in how it happens?

Seventy thinks so. But the Charter doesn't give the public any formal role in redistricting, other than through their Council representative. The rules of Council only require public comment at hearings and just before a plan is finally approved.

What can I do if I want a bigger say in redistricting?

You can let your district Council member – and the seven at-large members – know how you feel about the way Council is handling – or not handling – redistricting. Elected officials do pay attention to the calls, emails, and letters they get from constituents – especially during an election year. If you aren't sure who represents you in Council, or how to contact them, go to Seventy's "Online Citizen's Guide" at <http://guide.seventy.org>.



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Can I draw my own map?

You sure can. Seventy has partnered with Azavea to create <http://www.redistrictingthenation.com>, an interactive website that lets you draw your own political boundaries and also view some of the most gerrymandered districts in the United States.

Just out of curiosity: isn't redistricting happening at the state level too?

Yes, Pennsylvania has a five-member Legislative Reapportionment Commission that is in the process of drawing the boundaries for the state's 253 legislative districts to reflect population changes. The districts have to be ready soon since the boundaries officially take effect in the April 24, 2012 Pennsylvania primary election.

How are things going with the state's process?

It didn't start off too well. The four legislators on the Legislative Reapportionment Commission couldn't agree on a chair – so that decision had to be made by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. At its latest public meeting, there were only three speakers and hardly anyone showed up to listen.

Let's go back to Philly. Will the new redistricting plan impact the November 2011 general election?

No. Although the new redistricting plan *should* be approved in time for the November 8 general election – when all 17 Council seats are up for grabs – it would not be fair to change district lines in the middle of an election year. So any revised district lines won't go into effect until the next Council elections in 2015.

2015! So what's the rush?

Good question. Seventy has urged City Council to consider long-term reforms to improve future redistricting processes. For example, Council can establish a Citizens' Redistricting Commission, as exists in many other cities, to recommend district lines. Council could also amend the City Charter to extend the six month deadline for completing a redistricting plan.

Speaking about other cities, do other cities do a better job of redistricting?

Cities handle redistricting in different ways. For instance, Boston has a Committee on Census and Redistricting within City Council that solicits public input before they come up with a redistricting plan. Los Angeles has an Advisory Redistricting Commission – with members selected by Council members, the mayor, the District Attorney and City Controller – that submits a plan to its City Council for consideration. Minneapolis' Redistricting Commission, whose members are predominately chosen by City Council and the major political parties, submits a plan that must be accepted by City Council. Finally, Baltimore's mayor sends a redistricting plan to City Council – not the other way around.

How can I keep up with what's happening on redistricting?

Seventy has urged City Council to keep the public fully informed on redistricting by making hearing transcripts, proposed maps and other written materials available online on a dedicated and prominent page on their website: <http://www.phila.gov/citycouncil/>. We'll do our best to keep you posted too.

*We hope this helps you understand more about redistricting. If you have any questions, or have thoughts about other topics for our **IN THE KNOW** series, please contact us at futureofthecity@seventy.org.*