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Michigan Redistricting Collaborative pushes for increased transparency, public input into state and local redistricting

The Michigan Redistricting Collaborative, created by nonpartisan nonprofit organizations across the state, said today it will urge lawmakers and county redistricting commissions around the state to make their decisions more accountable, transparent, and open to public involvement.

The collaborative, composed of business, labor and public interest groups, said it would be undertaking a substantial education process in the months ahead to ensure that voters recognize how redistricting often takes electoral decisions out of their control. Too often redistricting is swayed by political interests and done without input from citizens, behind closed doors.

Christina Kuo, executive director of Common Cause Michigan and spokesperson for the Michigan Redistricting Collaborative, says the sanitizing effect of public attention is an important component that the collaborative hopes to bring to the process this year.

"Partisan redistricting isn't healthy for democracy in Michigan," said Kuo. "As Republican Congressman Bobby Shilling of Illinois recently said, 'Rather than allowing the politicians to go in and pick the voters, we should allow the voters to pick the politicians.'"

Members of the Michigan Redistricting Collaborative include the Michigan Nonprofit Association, The Center for Michigan, League of Women Voters of Michigan, Jackson County Chamber of Commerce, Common Cause Michigan, Michigan Campaign Finance Network and many others.

Jessica Reiser, president of the League of Women Voters of Michigan, said collaborative members are supporting efforts aimed at making the redistricting process more open and accountable to all. Among the proposals the collaborative will be backing are reforms to the state's vague redistricting statutes that would:

- Provide the public with data on a web site, with tools that allow the public to view and comments on redistricting maps proposed.
- Require four public hearings – three outside Lansing – to allow citizen input. To ensure transparency, the hearings should be broadcast live on the state redistricting web site, and transcripts, testimony and comments should be posted on the site.
- Mandate that any proposed map be posted on the web site 30 days prior to adoption, and include data on every district created showing voting age population and racial makeup. Also included should be a statement giving the public reasons why the district was drawn as it was, and how it serves the public interest.

On the county level, the collaborative will be asking counties to develop similar policies, aimed at increasing transparency.

John Bebow, executive director of The Center for Michigan, said a new report issued by the Center today shows that, under Michigan's current legislative boundaries, only about one in seven people lives in a competitive swing district.

"Data over the whole decade shows that the majority seats are lock-solid safe for one party or the other," Bebow said, noting Republicans trapped in Democratic districts and Democrats trapped in GOP districts accounted for almost 1.5 million votes that had little or no chance of impacting the outcome of those races. "Many voters wishing to influence the direction of government have very limited options at the polls."

Dale Moretz, board chair for the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce, said the business community is interested in an open and transparent redistricting process that will help keep regions together, to maximize lawmakers' ability to reflect the needs of a community.

"Partisan redistricting at any level reduces the power of voters to send messages to their elected officials," said Moretz. "Businesses know fair competition and level playing fields result in the best outcome for consumers. The same is true of elections, and should be a consideration in redistricting."

Kyle Caldwell, president and CEO of the Michigan Nonprofit Association, said the collaborative will be informing the public about redistricting and seeking public input on how best to change the process.

"The Center for Michigan will assist the collaborative by using its proven techniques of deliberative citizen engagement to involve Michigan's citizens in making useful reforms," he said. "We will be making presentations on the issue around the state, and welcome those who wish us to inform their memberships. Our web site, www.drawthelinesmichigan.com is up and will be adding information.

Those interested in becoming members of the collaborative or seeking a presentation on redistricting should contact Erin Skene-Pratt, who is coordinating collaborative activities, at 517-402-2440 or at erin.skenepratt@gmail.com