

GOP infighting stalls work of Ohio Redistricting Commission as election deadline looms

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The first meeting of the Ohio Redistricting Commission underscored divisions among legislative Republicans that stalled selecting a co-chairman Wednesday and threatened to complicate efforts to craft new, constitutional House and Senate maps by this fall.

Ohio currently has no maps for state House and Senate seats just three months before candidates must file to run for the 2024 election.

The Ohio Redistricting Commission, a seven-member panel tasked with drawing those maps, met Wednesday for the first time since May 2022. It was billed as an organizational meeting to set rules and pick co-chairs, but it ended after an hour of behind-the-scenes communication. Senate President Matt Huffman, R-Lima, and Speaker Jason Stephens, R-Kitts Hill, are tasked with picking who should co-chair the commission for Republicans.

Ultimately, Huffman and Stephens did not agree on a Republican co-chair, and Gov. Mike DeWine adjourned the meeting until Friday morning. Huffman has expressed an interest in running for House speaker at some point, an underlying point of tension between the two GOP legislative leaders.

Huffman told reporters Wednesday that he last discussed the chairmanship with Stephens about two weeks ago, saying that Senate Republicans should co-chair the new commission because House Republicans held the position last time.

"His response to me was, 'Well, we can talk about that.' So that's what's going on is we're talking about that," Huffman said. "I don't know whether it really makes a difference or not (who is co-chair). As I said, the real issue is the map."

Rep. Jeff LaRe, R-Violet Township, who represents House Republicans, said in a statement: "It is imperative members of the commission operate in good

faith with the shared goal of delivering strong representation for the people of Ohio. Our work is ongoing, and we look forward to our continued collaboration together."

Ohio Auditor Keith Faber, a Republican, was also discussed as an option to co-chair the commission. A spokesman said Faber would accept any role if it moves the redistricting process forward.

Democratic members of the commission, Senate Minority Leader Nickie Antonio and House Minority Leader Allison Russo, said they were in agreement on who would serve as the Democratic co-chairwoman, depending on whom the GOP picked.

Meanwhile, draft maps and concepts are already floating around and a tight deadline looms. And the first meeting has instilled little confidence in the process.

"This reminds me of student council government. It's like who the heck should be in charge? 'I want to be.' 'No, I want to be,'" said Catherine Turcer, executive director of Common Cause Ohio and a proponent of a constitutional amendment to replace these politicians with a citizen commission instead. "These kind of power plays are not productive. It shows a dysfunction that I didn't actually think that they had."

When will Ohioans see maps?

The commission must draft new legislative districts because the ones used in 2022 were repeatedly ruled unconstitutional by the Ohio Supreme Court and used only after a federal panel of judges declared them to be the only option.

Ohio's previous attempt to draw maps for its statehouse and congressional districts, which extended from August 2021 to July 2022, was panned as dysfunctional and frustrating at best and illegal and undemocratic at worst. Outside the Rhodes State Office Tower, a few dozen people gathered to call for "fair maps," cheering that "the manipulation of elections is the manipulation of public policy."

So when might Ohioans see legislative maps? It's not yet clear.

"Every caucus has probably done their own analysis internally of what they'd like to see happen," said Sen. Rob McColley, R-Napoleon who represents Senate Republicans on the commission. "but as far as that have exchanged hands, "To my knowledge, there have been some ideas exchanged. There may

have been some maps that have at least been shown in concept, but there's no final version of anything that we would even introduce at this point.”

Democrats Antonio and Russo said they have discussed concepts, ideas and places where the current maps could be adjusted. But they have not seen a full set of maps that they would vote for at this point.

“To ungerrymander a gerrymandered map, there have to be very difficult decisions made by the party in power, in this case, the Republicans, and so the question is, will they make those decisions to actually get to a constitutional, fair map?” said Russo, D-Upper Arlington.

When is the deadline?

Ohio Secretary of State Frank LaRose, a GOP member of the commission, recently asked fellow mapmakers to hit a Sept. 22 deadline to complete new state House and Senate districts – just over a week after Wednesday's initial meeting. The quick turnaround could limit public input in the final maps unless commission members are diligent.

“I know that there are various drafts out there that are being worked on,” LaRose told reporters Tuesday. “My hope is that we can get maps introduced so that we can start getting public comment on those.”

DeWine said last week that he believes the commission can hit that Sept. 22 deadline and said it's important for them to do so. But Russo said Tuesday that mid-October is a more reasonable deadline.

“I think some of it is performative,” Russo said of LaRose's proposed date. “We see another effort afoot to force this artificially quick deadline to pass these maps.”

New dynamics among mapmakers

The commission's dynamics and membership have changed since last year. For example, the fight over who will lead the Ohio House of Representatives appears to have infiltrated redistricting negotiations.

The Ohio House of Representatives' new leader, Stephens of Kitts Hill, was elected in January with help from House Democrats over the objections of several fellow Republicans. He plans to run for speaker in 2024 and might need Democratic support again to keep the gavel.

Meanwhile, Huffman is expected to run for the House in 2024 because he will be term-limited in the Senate. He is mulling a bid for speaker "someday," which could set up a showdown with Stephens.

Neither Stephens nor Huffman sit on the commission but their proxies, LaRe and McColley will. McColley is expected to succeed Huffman as Senate president in 2025.

Another dynamic is LaRose is running in a competitive GOP primary for the U.S. Senate in 2024, trying to win the endorsement of former President Donald Trump and fellow Republicans. In a news release from his office last week, LaRose slammed Democrats who sued over the congressional map, saying "The reality here is that allies of one political party tried to game the system by getting an outcome they wanted from the previous hyper-partisan court majority."

Meanwhile, DeWine has said Ohio politicians should get out of the mapmaking business but has stopped short of backing a proposed constitutional amendment that would give the power to a 15-member citizens panel instead.

The threat of a constitutional amendment on redistricting could loom over as mapmakers try to craft districts that last for more than two years.

Antonio, D-Lakewood, is the only new face on the commission, replacing Sen. Vernon Sykes, D-Akron. Antonio said she's willing to work toward passing maps that last for eight years rather than two – which would require both Democrats to vote for the plan.

"It seems like it will also be a heavy lift but I'm open to the possibility and hopeful," Antonio said. But she concedes a citizen-run process might be better, in the end. "We would all be better served by folks who are not office holders."

Reporter Haley BeMiller contributed to this article.