

Ohio Republicans introduce legislative redistricting plan after week-long delay

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COLUMBUS, Ohio—Republicans on the Ohio Redistricting Commission finally introduced a draft state legislative redistricting plan on Wednesday, ending [a week-long delay](#) due to infighting among legislative GOP leaders.

The commission voted 4-2, with the commission's two Democrats voting against, to advance the draft map to public hearings. Once those public hearings are finished, the commission would need to take another vote to adopt final maps.

The proposed Republican map, which the commission will now hold public hearings on starting Friday, would give their party an advantage in almost 63% (62 of 99) of Ohio House districts and nearly 70% (23 of 33) of Ohio Senate districts, according to Senate Majority Floor Leader Rob McColley, a Republican commission member from Northwest Ohio.

Republicans currently hold 67 of 99 House seats and 26 of 33 Senate seats under a map that the Ohio Supreme Court found unconstitutional but was used anyway in last year's elections.

McColley said the proposed maps wouldn't put any legislative incumbents in the same district, though House Minority Leader Allison Russo, a Democratic commission member from suburban Columbus, said two Columbus-area House Democrats would have to run against each other next year if they each seek reelection.

McColley said the map incorporated discussions that Republicans had with Democrats, though Senate Minority Leader Nickie Antonio, a Democratic commission member from Lakewood, said they only talked about "concepts" and "areas" and that she and Russo were only now seeing the full proposal for the first time.

Republicans focused on creating districts that didn't split up cities, McColley said, noting that the plan would keep Akron, Toledo, and Cincinnati each contained within a single Senate district. Antonio said she worried that Republicans are trying to "pack" urban Democrats into a single district, giving Republicans an advantage in neighboring districts – a charge McColley denied.

Whether the commission's Democrats support a final map is of great consequence. Under the Ohio Constitution, redistricting plans that have bipartisan backing last

through the end of the decade, rather than for just four years for maps passed only by one party.

The seven-member commission was sworn in last Wednesday, but the meeting was called off soon after that because Senate President Matt Huffman, a Lima Republican, and House Speaker Jason Stephens, a Lawrence County Republican, couldn't agree on the usually mundane issue of deciding which Republican should co-chair the commission. Huffman, who can't seek reelection in the Senate next year because of term limits, is expected to run for an Ohio House seat and challenge Stephens for the speaker's gavel in 2025.

The proposed GOP maps stem from negotiations held during the week-long interlude to iron out differences, including disagreements between Huffman and Stephens.

Huffman and Stephens ended up choosing State Auditor Keith Faber, a Republican commission member from Mercer County, to serve as Republican co-chair, according to a Senate GOP release Wednesday afternoon. Antonio was named the Democratic co-chair.

The Republicans on the commission shot down consideration of a proposed Democratic redistricting plan that would give Republicans an advantage in 56 House districts and 19 Senate districts, respectively. It remains to be seen whether Antonio and Russo will support the GOP-authored map drafts.

Russo said Wednesday that Republicans drafted their redistricting plan without Democratic input.

Gov. Mike DeWine, a Republican commission member, did not attend the meeting, as he [tested positive for COVID-19](#) on Tuesday afternoon.

The redistricting commission only has a few weeks at most to redraw legislative district lines before running afoul of administrative deadlines ahead of the March 2024 primary election. Secretary of State Frank LaRose, a GOP commission member and the state's top elections official, [previously warned](#) that new maps need to be passed by this Friday, though Russo maintains they have until mid-October.

The Ohio Constitution requires the redistricting commission to hold at least three public meetings on any draft maps before they can approve them.

The committee voted along party lines to hold those meetings on Friday, Sept. 22 at Deer Creek Lodge & Conference Center, located south of Columbus; Monday, Sept. 25 at Punderson Manor Lodge & Conference Center in Geauga County; and Tuesday, Sept. 26 at the Ohio Senate Finance Committee room at the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus. Faber said all hearings will begin at 10 a.m. and will be broadcast to the public on [the Ohio Channel](#).

Democrats objected, saying the schedule was too rushed and that the locations are outside major population centers. But McColley said Geauga County could see changes to its legislative districts under the proposed maps, and that Deer Creek State Park is located between Cincinnati and Columbus, “and pretty nearby to Dayton as well.”

Another point of contention was what rules the commission should operate under. The commission failed to adopt rules on Wednesday, as Democrats said they didn’t want to support what Republicans proposed. LaRose said the Ohio Constitution doesn’t require the commission to adopt rules.

The commission only needs to draw state legislative maps this time. Congressional districts are off the table now after the Ohio Supreme Court dismissed a case challenging the state’s congressional map at the request of Democrats and good government groups that sued over the maps last year.