Statehouse sidelights

Reapportionment knot offers complex problems

Politics

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No matter what legislative reapportionment proposal is finally accepted, it certainly won't meet with 100 percent approval among the lawmakers or party leaders.

Actually the public is disinterested in legislative reapportionment. There is only a fraction of a voters who can say they know the number and boundaries of their legislative districts, much less who are their legislative representatives.

The present plan under court squabble divides the state into 35 districts with two state representatives and one state senator in each district, or 35 state senators and 70 state representatives.

The plan approved by North Idaho District Judge Dar Cogswell would increase the districts to 44 with the same one state senator and two representatives in each district. This is the plan which is now pending on appeal and seems headed for the Idaho Supreme Court. It could even be bounced to the U.S. Supreme Court before the judicial process is completed.

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The recent observation of House Minority Leader Melvin Hammond, D-Hammond, that the present plan is fair should carry weight with the public.

Hammond said — and this writer strongly agrees — it was tough enough to try to hammer out 35 legislative districts with about equal population, much less worry about what political party would benefit.

This writer saw the legislators hard at work at all the reapportionment sessions trying to equalize boundary lines with no thought of gerrymandering. Considering the wide diversity of the state in population and economic structures, it is a wonder they did a good job. The 35 districts offer little more than 5 percent disparity from the least to the most populated.

Statements by Democratic Gov. John V. Evans that reapportionment carries political overtones don't square with the facts. Hammond, by his approval of the present plan, disagrees with the state executive chief of his own party.

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The plan approved by Judge Cogswell for 44 districts seeks to avoid splitting county lines but doesn't change much except electing 21 more legislators, seven in the Senate and 14 in the House.

Hammond is justified in saying Cogwell erred in adopting a plan submitted by a North Idaho college professor who probably knows less about the subject than most of the legislators. It was a north Idaho concept all the way.

In looking over the plan, it doesn't change much in east Idaho. Bonneville and Teton counties remain in one district; Fremont and Madison in another; Lemhi, Custer, Butte, Clark and Jefferson in one, and Bingham County has one of its own.

The only wide difference from the present plan is shifting Butte from Bonneville to its rural neighoring counties and designating Bingham as one district, rather than having Shelley, Fort Hall and Aberdeen apportioned to five neigbhoring districts.

There are, in addition, two "floaterial" districts. One includes the nine east Idaho counties and the other groups Bingham with Power and Bannock.

Election records in the past shows the state about 58 percent Republican and 42 percent Democrat. This is not reflected in the Legislature which the Republicans control in the Senate 21-14 and a topheavy 51-19 in the House. The 58 percent is close in the Senate but in the House it's an unfair 68 percent.

The fact the governor is a Democrat and controls hundreds of jobs and sets the state policies, however, gives equilibrium to the political structure.

Attorney General Jim Jones has appealed the district judge's ruling, with intentions it is headed to the Idaho Supreme. At the rate the judicial steps are progressing, it will indeed be fortunate to settle reapportionment in the courts in time to permit legislative candidates to file for the primary election next May.