

The Post-Register

The political pulse

Idaho Falls, Idaho, Sunday, July 26, 1981

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Legislative limelights...

Legislative remapping based on self interest

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The recently completed Idaho legislative district reapportionment wasn't exactly an example of perfection but perhaps the lawmakers, in their own words, "did the best job possible under the circumstances."

The underlying reasons for the apparent shoddy job was the natural desire of the legislators to protect their home district. Thus, those lawmakers who had the biggest political clout, such as the leadership and veteran committee chairmen, brought about some strange boundaries.

The one bright spot was in congressional redistricting which simply transferred some 21,500 from the 1st to the 2nd District and came within 175 of perfect. It was backed by the entire Idaho congressional delegation and most legislators. Gov. John V. Evans and some Boise legislators preferred not keeping Ada county split but the division had the advantage of giving the largest county in the state a strong voice in both districts.

Two East Idaho Republican senators, Mark G. Ricks, Rexburg, and William L. Floyd, were by far the hardest-working legislators in first drafting regional lines and then helping in settling legislative district boundaries. Unfortunately, their colleagues, particularly those in the South Central Area (Twin Falls), didn't go along and that was the nub of the problem.

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Sen. Israel Merrill, D-Blackfoot, and Rep. Darwin Young, R-Blackfoot, assistant majority leader, hit the nail on the head in explaining the problem when they said much of the grotesquely drawn districts resulted when the boundary lines were shifted from west to east, rather than the reverse.

The south central contingent led by Rep. Vard Chatburn, R-Albion, dean of the Legislature; Sen. Dean Van Engelen, R-Burley, and others from Twin Falls, opposed moving the Cassia county line to permit some 3,500 to be annexed to the southeastern counties. Chatburn, incidentally, hasn't even been opposed in years.

It was this situation which brought about annexing Oneida and south Bannock to Power for District 33 and raises the possibility of a gubernatorial veto or a lawsuit, or both. It can't be denied by the Republican leadership that adding Republican dominated Power county to District 33 was aimed at helping the two Republican state representatives, Myron Jones and Gene Evans, and against two Democratic senators, Bert Marley, McCammon, and to a less extent, Chick Bilyeu, Pocatello.

An excellent example of the pitfalls this brought is the breakup in the six legislative districts embracing most of the 10 East Idaho counties. They averaged out almost perfect to the 26,939 statewide legislature figure. There could have been a minimum of impact simply by transferring population within the three districts in Bonneville County.

But what happened?

As result of leaving the southeast counties

short by failure to get the Cassia county population some strange transfers were made. District 20, made up of Jefferson, Clark, Lemhi and Custer counties, was the most perfect district in the state with 26,947 population, only 22 short of the ideal figure.

Yet it was necessary to shift 347 residents from the Heise precinct in Jefferson to District 31, east Bonneville and Teton.

East Bonneville, about 7,000 over the average, in turn transferred about 6,000 in four east Idaho Falls precincts to District 30, central Bonneville and Shelley, and 1,100 in two north Idaho Falls precincts to District 29, west Bonneville and Butte. These transfers within Bonneville county were the only ones contemplated beforehand and would hardly have been noticed.

Another distasteful task was shifting two precincts in Rexburg containing mostly out-of-county Ricks students to District 31. The vote in these precincts are mostly of academic nature as they are students who generally vote in their own counties or are foreign students, or don't even vote.

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The most disastrous remapping fell on Bingham County whose Legislative District 27 population of 27,152 was near the statewide average.

In the domino effect of moving boundary lines from the west, the two Shelley precincts were split, with No.1 retained in Bonneville District 30 and No.2 shifted to District 27. Then Rockford and Fort Hall precincts in the south and west were moved to Bannock District 35.

It's ironical that East Idaho which was near perfect was forced to undergo unnecessary remapping because of the selfishness of Chatburn, Van Engelen and most other Twin Falls area legislators who carried the big stick.

By the obvious gerrymandering in District 33, it raises chances for the gubernatorial veto and lawsuit. If there is a veto, the redistricting could be handled during the regular session next winter.

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There were other trouble spots, such as moving the north-south line to place Adams county and northern half of Valley county into North Idaho districts, and creating the extra legislative districts in Boise. This was done by largely including outlying rural areas in small slices of Ada county and Boise, as an obvious effort to deny Boise City a full-fledged urban voice.

Most Boise legislators and some powerful rural legislators included in this outlandish set up, such as Sen. David Little, R-Emmett; and J. Wilson Steen, R-Glenns Ferry; and Rep. Morgan Munger, R-Ola, are unhappy and have also raised the threat of a court challenge.

Ricks, Floyd and many legislators were sincere in seeking to draft lines they thought would be fair but their efforts were thwarted by the so-called leadership which did more harm than good. There was talk around the capitol that maybe Myron Schlechte, the astute Legislative Council director, should have been given a free rein to draw the lines. They would have been proper.