

Congressman Joins Statehouse GOP In Calling For Redistricting Commission

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SPRINGFIELD – Illinois Congressman Rodney Davis joined his Republican colleagues in the General Assembly Monday, April 12, in calling on Gov. JB Pritzker to support legislation to form an independent commission to redraw congressional and state legislative district maps.

“In the end, I think the public is demanding an open transparent process,” Davis, of Taylorville, said during a Statehouse news conference. “And many of our colleagues, including Gov. Pritzker, have said in their own words, that they would like an open and transparent process, one that’s going to stop politicians from picking their own voters.”

Both the U.S. and Illinois constitutions require that district maps be redrawn every 10 years using the latest census data to ensure equal representation. The Illinois Constitution requires

it to be done in the year following the decennial census.

The state constitution also requires that the General Assembly complete its work by June 30. After that, the process is handed over to an eight-member bipartisan commission and, if that body fails to approve new maps by Aug. 10, a ninth member is appointed by random selection to give one party or the other a 5-4 majority.

That’s the process that has been used in four of the last five redistricting efforts. Only in 2011 did the General Assembly complete the process before the June 30 deadline.

But Republicans this year have proposed legislation, Senate Bill 1325, that would authorize the Illinois Supreme Court to appoint a 16-member commission made up of seven Democrats, seven Republicans and two independents.

The plan is similar to a proposed constitutional amendment that voters petitioned to have placed on

the November 2016 ballot but which the state Supreme Court rejected on technical grounds.

“In 2016, we had almost 580,000, Illinoisans that signed petitions to put a commission on the ballot yet that was kicked off by Mike Madigan and his legal team and by one judge, a single judge with the Supreme Court, Judge Tom Kilbride, who wrote the majority decision that kicked that off the ballot ... or else we would be drawing maps a different way this year, I believe,” said Rep. Tim Butler, R-Springfield.

The idea of an independent redistricting commission has enjoyed bipartisan support in the past. In fact, Monday’s news conference featured a large poster board with a quote from then-candidate JB Pritzker, who said during the 2018 campaign, “We should amend the constitution to create an independent commission to redraw legislative maps, but in the meantime, I would urge Democrats and Republicans

to agree to an independent commission to handle creating a new legislative map.”

Rep. Avery Bourne, R-Morrisonville, urged Pritzker to support the GOP plan.

“While the context may have changed, when he was asked that question, it was assumed that Mike Madigan would be drawing the maps,” she said. “His pledge has not and cannot change.”

In 2019, Sen. Julie Morrison, D-Lake Forest, proposed a constitutional amendment that many believe would have passed Supreme Court scrutiny. That measure had 36 cosponsors, including 17 Democrats, but it was never assigned to a substantive committee and it died at the end of the 2020 session.

Butler pointed to the city of Springfield as an example of how legislative districts have been gerrymandered for partisan gain.

When the current maps were drawn in 2011, he said, the capital city was divided among three House districts and three Senate

districts, and initially none of the lawmakers holding those seats actually lived in Springfield.

“Why was that done,” Butler asked. “That was done for partisan political reasons to try to get new Democrat seats in there. That’s what it was.”

Republicans argue that legislative maps have been drawn intentionally to favor Democrats, and they have alleged that Democrats have a disproportionate advantage in the General Assembly because of it.

Democrats, however, have argued that the maps also ensure that racial and ethnic minorities are fairly represented, and they have accused Republicans of trying to break up those voting groups, who traditionally vote Democratic.

“As Republicans nationwide seek to silence Black and Brown communities, Democrats in Illinois remain committed to the creation of a fair map that reflects the great diversity of our state,” Sen. Omar Aquino, D-Chicago, who chairs the Senate Redistricting Committee, said in a statement Monday. “We have invited communities of interest across Illinois to participate

in this process, including establishing an online portal that allows anyone to draw and submit their own proposed maps.”

Aquino also argued that the GOP bill would likely be found unconstitutional because, without an amendment, the Constitution currently requires the General Assembly to redraw maps every 10 years.

Rep. Elizabeth Hernandez, D-Cicero, who chairs the House Redistricting Committee, said after a hearing Monday that she does not know whether the idea of an independent commission is dead for this year.

“It’s a continuing conversation,” she said. “I can’t tell you, until really once we’re finalized with all the testimony, what direction this will take.”

She also said she had not spoken to Pritzker or House Speaker Emanuel “Chris” Welch, D-Hillside, about the issue.

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FOID, Concealed Carry Permits Extended Again

Illinois State Police assure lawmakers agency is clearing renewal backlog

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SPRINGFIELD – The Illinois State Police has given another 150-day extension to people whose Firearms Owners Identification cards or Concealed Carry Licenses have expired due to a backlog in processing renewal applications.

A panel of state lawmakers gave approval Tuesday to that emergency rule after ISP officials assured them that the agency had made significant progress toward clearing a backlog of renewal applications.

“I wouldn’t say we’re over the hump. We’re on top of it,” ISP Lt. Greg Hacker, who heads the agency’s Firearms Services Bureau, told the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules. “Over the past three months, our metrics have shown us that we are starting to bend the curve in our direction.”

Under the emergency rule, a FOID card or CCL that has expired since the start of the pandemic is still considered valid as long as the holder has applied for renewal, paid the required fees, and the card is not subject to revocation, meaning the person has not committed an offense that would otherwise disqualify them from holding the permit.

Yvette Loizon, ISP’s general counsel, said that in the month of March alone, the agency received 14,847 renewal applications, and it approved 67,847 applications, the largest number of approvals in a single month in more than a year.

ISP saw a huge increase in renewal applications last year, Hacker said, in part because FOID cards are issued on 10-year renewal cycles and the 2019-2020 period marked the end of the program’s first 10-year cycle.

But the program has been beset by funding and per-

sonnel shortages, officials have said. The application and renewal process involves extensive criminal background checks that are paid for with the fees paid by applicants. But that fee fund was often “swept” during the state’s two-year-long budget impasse, so the agency did not have enough staff to handle the flood of renewal applications that came in last year.

Hacker said ISP began 2020 with only 21 “firearms eligibility analysts,”

or FEAs, who are trained to process applications. Since then, he said, the agency has hired an additional 29 FEAs and it plans to hire another five or six by July. In addition, ISP has hired another 25 contractual employees to conduct background checks for both new and renewal applications.

But Hacker said it has been a slow process to get all of those new employees fully operational because the training process generally takes about six months.

Meanwhile, gun rights activists in Illinois have grown impatient. Although state law requires ISP to process applications within 30 days, many have complained of waiting several months before ever getting a response from the agency.

In July, the Illinois State Rifle Association and the Second Amendment Foundation filed a federal lawsuit against ISP, arguing that the FOID card processing delays were effectively violating the applicants’ consti-

tutional right to bear arms. That case is still pending, according to court documents.

Members of the joint committee pointed out that they have been hearing complaints from constituents for months.

“I mean, within the last two days, I’ve gotten emails from folks, they applied last July. We’re nine months in, haven’t heard a word,” said Sen. Donald DeWitte, R-St. Charles.

Sen. Bill Cunningham, D-Chicago, a cochair of the committee, said he has also heard complaints from constituents.

“So we’re gratified to see that the process is moving up (and) ask you to continue to work with JCAR staff on this,” Cunningham said. “There’s been a long-standing problem that has only gotten worse because of COVID. So it’s something that still demands a long-term solution.”

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