

# OPINION

[www.herald-review.com](http://www.herald-review.com)

## Redistricting reform appears unlikely

By the H&R Editorial Staff

Sunday, October 17, 2009

One of the key tenets of ethics reform in Illinois is for the state to devise a system that fairly determines the state's legislative and congressional districts.

But recent comments by State Sen. Kwame Raoul, D-Chicago, chairman of a legislative panel that is holding hearings on the issue, aren't encouraging.

The process is important because it determines in large part whether Illinois will have fair and equitable elections or whether certain districts will be drawn to guarantee victory for one party or the other. The districts will be redrawn based on the 2010 Census, and it's expected that the state will lose a congressional seat because of population growth in other states.

It's also clear that in the past, the task of drawing district lines has had more to do with politics than anything else.

The best example, of course, is the 17th Congressional District, which includes a great deal of Rock Island County but also winds its way through Springfield and a part of Decatur. It's shaped like a giant lobster claw. Decatur has the dubious distinction of being represented by three congressional members.

During its spring session, the General Assembly took the baby step of calling for hearings on the issue around the state. We're talking about a tiny, tiny baby step.

In a story in last Sunday's Herald & Review, Raoul said he hasn't made up his mind whether the process should be changed.

But some of his comments are troubling.

Raoul said the 17th Congressional District isn't really all that bad because people in the district share a common theme; a mix of rural and urban territory. Of course, the entire state south of Interstate 80 shares that bond.

Raoul points to his own district, which follows the Lake Michigan shore line. He said people in his district share the commonality of living along the lakefront.

What Raoul won't say is that the districts were drawn to protect incumbents. The 17th District was drawn so it would lean Democrat for the foreseeable future. We're confident the same is true of Raoul's district.

Even more troubling, Raoul claims his committee has undertaken a review of how other states draw their district maps. He said none of them has been proven to be better or worse than Illinois.

"Nobody's got it perfect," he said.

It may be that no plan is perfect, but it's easy to find states that have insulated this process from the political parties, which is the main problem in Illinois. Throw a dart at a map, and you'll likely find a state that has a better, fairer process. Or look to Iowa, where the districts are decided in a nonpartisan manner and follow county lines.

Although the process in Illinois is supposed to be nonpartisan, the party in power controls how the maps are drawn. In 2002, Republicans controlled the General Assembly. After the 2010 Census, it's expected that Democrats will control the process, and thus Raoul and his party have little interest in reform.

It would be nice to believe the panel's hearings have a purpose and the General Assembly will consider reforming how the state's political map is constructed.

But experience as taught us that's naive, and Raoul's comments reinforce that belief.