

POLITICS

Last minute changes move El Cajon to East County voting district



Voters check in with poll workers before casting their votes at the San Diego Registrar of Voters in this 2020 file photo. (Alejandro Tamayo/The San Diego Union-Tribune)

The San Diego County redistricting commission on Saturday also moved Spring Valley and Paradise Hills to a central urban district

BY DEBORAH SULLIVAN BRENNAN

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As its deadline to draw new voting boundaries approached, the San Diego County Independent Redistricting Commission voted on a new draft map that would move Chaldean and Black communities into new districts, based on hours of emotional testimony.

The commission was slated to approve an earlier draft map Thursday but postponed that decision after hundreds of speakers opposed the placement of communities, including the cities of Spring Valley and El Cajon and the San Diego neighborhood of Paradise Hills. The meeting was continued to Saturday, when commissioners voted on a new version that aimed to address those complaints.

The compromise version approved Saturday involved a swap in territory between District 4, an urban area in central San Diego currently represented by Board of Supervisors Chair Nathan Fletcher, and District 2, which includes East County and other unincorporated backcountry communities and is served by Supervisor Joel Anderson.

The new map would move El Cajon from District 4 and place it instead in District 2. That change was made to accommodate concerns from the Chaldean community of Iraqi Christians, who said they identify the city as being part of rural East County.

It would also switch Spring Valley and Paradise Hills, both communities with a high population of Black residents and other people of color, from District 1 to District 4.

San Diego County must adjust boundaries once a decade to balance the number of constituents in each district while preserving cities, neighborhoods and “communities of interest,” which includes areas with common geographic, economic or cultural interests.

The 14-member bipartisan commission considered 2020 U.S. Census data, heard from hundreds of public speakers and considered dozens of maps. They work independently from elected officials and are prohibited from considering the new boundaries’ effects on political parties or representatives.

The maps will set the lines for county supervisors’ jurisdictions for the next 10 years. The commission must vote to finalize the new boundaries before its Dec. 14 deadline to deliver a decision to the secretary of state.

“I think the record shows that over and over and over again we have been trying to keep (communities of interest) together, and it has been a near impossible task, but I think we’ve done a pretty good job,” commission Co-Vice Chair Carmen Rosette Garcia said.

The 11th hour changes were partly the result of delays in final census data, which forced the commission to draw the new maps on a condensed time frame this fall. It also represented efforts to weigh competing interests from community groups, including Black San Diegans, new immigrants and refugees, and a well-established Chaldean community in El Cajon, East County and surrounding areas.

Chaldean activists showed up by bus to Thursday's meeting to demand that El Cajon be placed in District 2. They said their conservative, religious community fits into the rural small-town culture of East County.

Other speakers said the city is drawing high numbers of new immigrants and refugees, who have more in common with neighborhoods in District 4 than with East County communities. Two commissioners, Ramesses Surban and Sonia Diaz, sided with those speakers and voted against moving El Cajon into District 2.

"El Cajon is past transition," Surban said. "It's already a city of immigrants and refugees."

Commissioners voted for the compromise measure to try to balance those concerns. In a separate measure they voted against adding Rancho San Diego to District 2 as well.

"These are all legitimate interests," said the commission's attorney, Marguerite Leoni. "This is where you weigh and balance, and make sure that the record is clear about the choices you are making and to what you are responding. It's not that you disrespect a different point of view; you just can't do it all."

The new map also draws District 1, now represented by Supervisor Nora Vargas, as a minority-majority district with more than 50 percent Latino voters. It establishes District 3, covered by Supervisor Terra Lawson-Remer, as a coastal district.

And it maintains District 5, currently represented by Supervisor Jim Desmond, as a North County district. The newly drawn district would include the state Route 78 cities of Escondido, San Marcos, Vista and Oceanside; Camp Pendleton; unincorporated communities of Fallbrook, Bonsall, Rainbow and Valley Center; and a number of tribal reservations.

In separate amendments Saturday, the commission added a small area to District 5 to preserve the Valley Center Fire Protection District and added the communities of Borrego Springs and Ocotillo Wells.

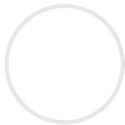
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