

Minority voters underrepresented, panel told

St. Paul hearing is 2nd of eight statewide seeking public input on redistricting

By Bill Salisbury

bsalisbury@pioneerpress.com

Judges assigned to draw Minnesota's new political boundaries were urged Wednesday night to create new legislative districts where racial minorities have a better chance of getting elected so they are fairly represented in St. Paul and Washington.

The appeal came during a public hearing by the state's court-appointed special redistricting panel at the Minnesota Judicial Center in St. Paul.

Speaker after speaker told the five judges on the panel that strong gains in minority populations in the past 10 years call for creating more districts where minorities would make up a majority of voters or "minority opportunity" districts where people of color would make up at least 30 percent of the electorate, thus giving them a better chance of winning.

Only six of Minnesota's 201 legislators — or 3 percent — are people of color. The 2010 U.S. census found that 17 percent of Minnesotans identified themselves as nonwhite or Hispanic.

Minorities would hold 29 seats — almost five times as many as they currently occupy — if they were proportionately represented, said Emma Greenman, a Ramsey County public defender.

James Haggard of St. Paul, representing Education Minnesota, the teachers union, said students of color need more minority representation at the Capitol to "ensure there are a fair number of strong voices for them."

Paul Sawyer of St. Paul

Bruce Corrie, dean of business and

organizational leadership at Concordia University in St. Paul, made an economic argument for increasing minority representation.

Speaking for the organization OneMN, a collaborative of the state's African-American, Latino, Asian-American and American Indian communities, he noted that Minnesota minorities have \$12 billion in buying power, a sum that would make them the 15th-largest business in the state.

munity issues that are now ignored would "help Minnesota become more globally competitive," Corrie said.

Race wasn't the only issue addressed at the hearing.

Several Washington County residents of the 6th Congressional District — which stretches from the St. Croix River Valley to farm country west of St. Cloud — asked the judges to put them in a more suburban or St. Paul-affiliated district where they would have more in common with fellow voters.

Gerald Beedle of Lakeland said St. Croix valley residents' connections to Anoka County and St. Cloud are "so remote, it's hard to understand."

Residents of several cities pleaded with the judges not to split their communities into multiple districts.

Candi Walz, chair of Draw the Line Minnesota's citizens redistricting commission, said the overriding concern of the more than 300 people who testified at the group's 18 listening sessions was "protect our communities of interest."

In addition to cities, counties and townships, Walz said, communities of interest include groupings of people that share similar demographic characteristics, transportation corridors, economic patterns and social interests.

The hearing was the second of eight such sessions the

panel will conduct around the state through next week to get public suggestions on how to draw the new lines.

The state constitution authorizes the Legislature and governor to draw new legislative and congressional district boundaries to reflect population changes identified in each 10-year census. But if they don't get the job done, the courts do it for them.

In Minnesota, the courts have had to draw the lines in four of the past five decades. It looks like that will happen again.

Earlier this year, the Republican-controlled Legislature passed two redistricting bills on party-line votes, and DFL Gov. Mark Dayton vetoed them. Lawmakers could try to pass bipartisan plans by Feb. 21, the statutory deadline for redistricting, but no serious efforts are underway to do so.

Presiding Judge Wilhelmina Wright told the audience of about 50 that the panel will "give the Legislature every opportunity to complete redistricting," but the judges will simultaneously draft new redistricting maps "so we will be prepared to act if necessary" by the deadline.

State residents, political parties and other interested groups may submit written statements and maps to the panel until Oct. 21.

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