



SIERRA CLUB

LONE STAR CHAPTER

Special Committee on Redistricting

**The Honorable Joan Huffman, Chair
Honorable Senators**

**Re: SB 6, Proposed Redistricting Maps
From: Cyrus Reed, Conservation Director, Lone Star Chapter
Sierra Club, cyrus.reed@sierraclub.org, 512-888-9411**

September 30th, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to offer some comments on the proposed draft maps of Congressional representatives for 2022 as outlined in SB 6. I am here on behalf of the Lone Star Chapter – which is the Texas Chapter of the Sierra Club. Because these maps would shape the congressional districts for the next 10 years -- including increasing the relative power of Texas by adding two new congressional districts -- it is vitally important that lines are drawn fairly, create communities of interest, and do not unfairly favor one demographic or another and do not lock in

districts that will never be competitive for either of the main political parties.

Unfortunately, having studied the proposed maps, and despite not being an expert on the redistricting process, it is clear these maps are not being drawn with the overall interests of Texan in mind, or in terms of “Communities of Interest” as defined under the Voting Rights Act. Instead, the current version of SB 6 is a naked attempt to draw districts that would lessen the voting strength of communities, split up cities and counties and create non-logical districts. The 38 proposed districts just don’t make sense.

The Sierra Club has approximately 30,000 members in the State of Texas. Our members care deeply about our state and planet’s future, and tend to care about the impacts and solutions to our climate catastrophes, and work on local issues tied to airsheds, climate action plans, drought and flood planning and other issues that have geographic implications. I can state clearly without having interviewed them personally that the map as written in SB 6 will not serve their interests. Sierra Club members care deeply about politics, policy and issues that are impacted by how you draw the lines.

While I do thank the committee for giving us a 72-hour window to look at this proposal, I would request that you hold at least an additional public hearing and carefully consider written testimony, and other maps that have been proposed. Indeed a different map submitted by Jeff Harper with the League of Independent Voters -- Plan C2102 -- seems far superior to the official map -- Plan C2101 -- with its uniquely drawn convoluted districts. Indeed, I

think Texas would be better served by starting with Mr. Harper's map than the "official" map. It just makes more sense and does not seem drawn to favor any particular political party or ethnic group.

Some obvious truths

Texas is growing. The state has become more ethnically diverse as in-state and in-migration growth among particularly Latino, Asian and Black communities has been responsible for more than 95% of the growth. Our cities and suburban areas are growing, while there has been some loss of population in certain parts of rural and West Texas.

The three areas of the state that have seen particularly high levels of pronounced growth have been in the DFW, and Houston-Fort Bend areas and in the areas surrounding Austin, such as Williamson and Hays Counties. We expected this committee to provide fairer maps in particular for the Central Texas, Dallas and Houston areas that better represent communities of interest and to add two minority or latino-opportunity districts in the Houston and Dallas areas, and more districts in the Austin area that are more representative of the population.

We should not be continuing Texas traditions of gerrymandering and map manipulation, where districts are either cracked in such a way that no congressperson, state representative or state senator is representing that community, or packed to unfairly tip the balance toward one political party. We have seen this in

particular in Travis County, where we have five different congress people representing the county and four state senators cracking lines in Travis County.

No one has been harmed more by map manipulation and voter suppression than Black and Latino communities whose voices have been minimized at the ballot box and in Congress.

I ask that you work to end map manipulation and gerrymandering.

The Draft Congressional Map

The Sierra Club is vehemently opposed to the proposed draft map that is before us for Federal Congressional Districts. In essence, you have made the districts less competitive and have drawn them in a way that will create more districts that are dominated by Anglo and rural voices and dilute the power of minority voices and the urban cores. This clearly favors one political party, but it also will lead to much more “partisan” districts, making it very difficult to create common ground.

In earlier pronouncements, we made it clear that one factor that might assist you in redrawing lines would be to consider environmental factors, including industrial areas, flood or hurricane zones, watersheds or similar topographies (i.e. hill country or blackland prairies). Virtually none of the proposed 38 Congressional districts would meet these environmental “communities of interest.”

Some unbelievable, embarrassing outrageous examples

We find in particular proposed District 13 to be an example of drawing a district without consideration of a community of interest. It stretches from the high plains of the panhandle - think ranching, cotton farming and the Southwest Power Pool - to North Central Texas and in particular to 33 percent of Wise County and 15 Percent of Denton County -- think urban college town, ERCOT and a completely different watershed. In other words, it takes 100% of northwest Texas, and then divides two more urban, more easterly urban counties. The Panhandle residents are not a community of interest with Wise or Denton residents who care about ozone, clean energy and transit, and ERCOT reform.

There are similar problems in the DFW area, where a few districts have been made more “minority-majority” but other areas completely stretched into more rural districts. Thus Districts 4, 5 and 6 incorporate small slivers of Dallas and/or Denton County, while in the Houston area, while Districts 7, 8 and 9 seem designed to divide Harris and Fort Bend Counties.

While we appreciate residents in Nueces County being kept together, District 27 goes very far to the northwest, which again is in a completely different geography and watersheds and is quite different from the communities in San Patricio and Nueces Counties. Similarly Districts 15 and 28 go far from the border snaking up into the San Antonio area, or even further north.

Perhaps most disappointing of all is the continued lack of respect to the citizens of Austin. The proposed map continues to divide Travis County into a dizzying number of districts, including a new

District 10 which takes in West Austin, parts of north Austin, and areas East of Austin like half of Bastrop and Lee and Fayette Counties. The “hill country” part of Travis County has little in common with the pinewood forests of Bastrop County or even the growing high tech area of North Austin.

Texas will be best served where we have districts that can truly represent the interests of the people. That will also tend to lead to fairer less partisan districts that will lead to better bi-partisan policy that would be supported by most Texans. SB 6 will continue to make it very hard for our country to come together around a common vision. Under this map, the so-called “Democratic” districts will become more democratic and their representatives will be decided in primary elections, and the same will happen in the more Republican districts.

Please throw this proposed map into the dumping ground of history and come up with maps that are based on real communities of interest, regardless of political parties. It is time for the people to be able to choose their representatives, and not allow the politicians to choose their voters.