



SIERRA CLUB

LONE STAR CHAPTER

House Committee on Redistricting

**The Honorable Todd Hunter, Chair
Honorable Representatives**

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Thank you for the opportunity to offer some brief written comments on SB 4 as it passed the Senate. These maps would determine our state senate districts beginning in 2022. I am here on behalf of the Lone Star Chapter – which is the Texas Chapter of the Sierra Club. Because these maps will shape the Texas Senate for the next 10 years, 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, SB 4 does not meet any of these values. Essentially, SB 4 diminishes the voting power of minority populations even as they have increased in their make-up of the overall and voting age population, and splits counties apart, all while ensuring that the current party in power remains in power for at least 10 years. Worse, the map seems designed to even punish one particular West Texas Republican Senator simply because he has not always voted with the majority party.

Some obvious truths

Texas is growing. Even with the difficulty of conducting a Census during a time of COVID that may have impacted our totals, the Census shows an exploding population where virtually every demographic is growing. The state has become more ethnically diverse as both in-state growth among particularly Latino and Asian communities, but also due to immigration from many nations. 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 expect this committee to provide fairer maps in particular for the Central Texas, Dallas and Houston areas that better represent communities of interest.

We should not continue 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.

SB 4 Maps

The Sierra Club is opposed to SB 4 as it passed the Senate. That does not mean we oppose every drawn district, but we are most concerned by the changes that in our view split up or water down communities of interest in the Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston areas. In essence, the Senate has made the districts less competitive and have drawn them in a way that will favor the Republican Party and dilute the power of minority voices. 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). We do not believe the present

maps -- and particularly in Dallas Fort Worth and Houston - would meet these environmental “communities of interest.”

We do recognize that some improvements, including the consolidation of Senate District 14 within Travis County does represent some progress.

A few particular egregious cases

We are very concerned by the splitting up of growing communities like Fort Bend County between proposed districts 7, 17 and 18,, and would note that Senator Huffman’s own district contorts in very strange ways, covering very different parts of the state. Again we would support keeping communities together, particularly those that share watersheds and flood zones.

We are most concerned, however, by the maps in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, which seems purposefully designed to dilute the voting power of the growing urbanized and suburban core. Most egregious is the redrawing of Senate District 10, which now includes more rural counties like Parker and Johnson, but also the redrawing of Senate District 8, 12 and Senate District 30 which seems to purposefully dilute the voting power of Denton County. We would also note the way the newly proposed District 22 now creates a tentacle up into Tarrant County, which has little to do with the rest of the proposed district.

Again, we believe the Special Committee should reconsider the Dallas-Fort Worth area, better define communities of interest, and

consider factors such as watersheds, and industrial concentration when drawing these districts.

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.

We hope the House will fix these badly drawn Senate maps, largely designed to help the current Lt. Governor increase his power over the Senate.