

OUR VIEW

N.C. voters have right to fair districts

StarNews Editorial Board

The prospect of making North Carolina's gerrymandered districts fair — and doing so in a timely manner — isn't looking good.

N.C. House and Senate Republicans have hired Beltway computer geek Tom Hofeller to draw maps. He's being paid \$50,000 in taxpayer money for what essentially is political consulting.

Insiders might recall that Hofeller drew the maps that helped give the GOP a hammer-lock.

Before Hofeller's magic, Democrats had a 7-6 majority in the U.S. House delegation. That's now 9-3 for Republicans, despite the state being about as politically balanced as they come.

In 2012, slightly more than half of North Carolinians voted for Democrats in General Assembly races. Thanks to creative districting, however, the GOP wound up with veto-proof majorities in both houses. Go figure.

Hofeller is one of a coterie of computer gurus that the Atlantic Monthly called "the League of Dangerous Mapmakers." The native Californian has never lived in North Carolina and doesn't know much about it. He doesn't have to. He has the population maps, including where minority voters live, and results showing voting patterns to the block. With nifty computer software, he can draw lines — sometimes, very squiggly lines — guaranteeing safe margins to as many Republicans as possible.

Downtown Wilmington residents found themselves for a while represented by Congressman Walter Jones Jr., a Farmville Republican whose district abuts Virginia. David Rouzer, who represents the biggest coastal city and region in the state, lives in that coastal mecca, Benson.

Some of Hofeller's work has been overturned. In May, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that two Tar Heel congressional districts were unconstitutional.

Legislators apparently hope that he can come up with something that will satisfy the high court's ruling while keeping outcomes pretty much as they are.

There's another way to do this, of course. Last year, Duke University convened a panel of retired state judges — Democrats and Republicans — to draw maps. The results were quite sensible.

We want to be clear — our push for fair districts is not about getting more Democrats elected. If fair districts are put in place and Republicans keep their veto-proof majorities, more power to them.

Republicans, of course, owe no favors to the Democrats, who once did their share of gerrymandering. They do, however, owe it to the people of North Carolina to create a voting landscape that's not rigged.

So why not provide a fair playing field, let the sides put up their best candidates and ideas, and see who wins? Sort of like letting the free market work. Isn't that a Republican tenet?