January 23, 2018

Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for allowing me to speak today. With the shutdown of the Federal government this past weekend, we have seen once again that we have serious issues with the way our governmental systems are functioning. Our partisan divide grows ever larger where all too many decisions come down not to compromise and the effort to give a little/get a little or finding a win-win, but rather to winner take all and no compromise no matter the consequences.

There are many reasons for the increasing dysfunction of our governing bodies. One contributing factor that I and many other good citizens in the state of Ohio have been working diligently to change is the way that our US Congressional Districts are drawn in the state of Ohio. I know that you received much input from the public on the need to change how district lines are drawn. I listened both in person and on line to much of that testimony. As I know you are aware, Fair Congressional Districts for Ohio has been working since June to collect signatures to place the issue on the November ballot. It is a well thought out proposal that models the already approved method of creating Ohio General Assembly district maps. It uses the same bipartisan Ohio Redistricting Commission that will set Ohio General Assembly districts. This commission will use the same guidelines in setting Congressional districts as it uses in setting General Assembly districts. How district lines for the General Assembly will be drawn was overwhelmingly approved by voters in Ohio. I believe that it won in every county. The vast majority of the people of Ohio want to take partisan interests out of how district lines are drawn both at the state level and the federal level. There is no reason to have two vastly different methods for the two levels.

The proposed Fair Districts amendment defines who shall sit on the Ohio Redistricting Commission and requires not only that at least two members are appointed by the minority party but also requires that at least two members of the minority party must approve of the new district lines. It prohibits a member of Congress from serving on the Commission and allows for any Ohio citizen to propose a plan for the Commission to consider. It gives criteria that must be included in the plan such as lines not being drawn to favor or disfavor a political party, no county being split more than once, compact and equal-population districts, etc.

The proposal introduced last week by State Senator Matt Huffman—SJR 5--includes some, but not all, of the changes of the Fair Districts initiative. One big difference is that Senator Huffman’s proposal keeps the power to draw the lines in the hands of the General Assembly rather than giving it to the bipartisan Ohio Redistricting Commission. SJR 5 does provide that at least 1/5 of the nonmajority party members of each house of the assembly must approve the new district lines. As currently constituted In the Ohio House and Ohio Senate, 33 of 99 Representatives and 9 of 33 Senators are nonmajority members. One-fifth of 33 is 6.6 or 7 members and one-fifth of 9 is 1.8 or 2 members. Under the Fair Districts proposal, however, 2 nonmajority members of 7 total members must approve the new district lines. SJR 5 provides way too little nonmajority party input into the district-line decisions. In addition, the makeup of the Commission is far more likely to reflect the citizens of Ohio as a whole given that three of the members were voted in by all Ohio voters versus being voted in by voters in districts that were assigned to the Republicans or assigned to the Democrats, a situation that will have no chance of changing until 2022, thereby not allowing for nonpartisan US House lines to be drawn until after the 2030 census.

It is highly likely that the SJR 5 proposal, if adopted, is likely to result in a 12-3 or at best an 11-4 split versus the current 12-4 (Ohio will likely lose one seat as a result of the census). Given that Ohio is a swing state in Presidential elections, that we currently have 1 Democratic Senator and 1 Republican Senator (and have at times in the past had 2 Senators from the Democratic Party and at other times had 2 Senators from the Republican party), that lopsided of a Congressional delegation is accomplished only via districting that is intentionally designed to favor one party over another.

 While I am a registered Democrat, I have in the past voted for Republicans at all levels. I have voted for independents. I must confess that I have not voted for a Republican in a long time. One of the reasons is that our current system--where the outcome of the general election with regard to district representatives is determined not in the general election but in the primary--is a major contributing factor to my most recent election choices. In no way am I suggesting that only Republicans engage in partisan line drawing. Democrats are guilty of the same in the states where they have the ability to do so. It doesn’t matter who does it, it isn’t good for that state or for our country. Partisan districts promote the most extremes in either party. It discourages moderates, it discourages taking moderate positions, and it discourages working across party lines and making reasonable compromises in the best interest of our country and its citizens. One party control is not democracy. It is a dictatorship.

That is why I and hundreds of other volunteers have worked to gather signatures to get the Fair Congressional Districts proposal on the November ballot. The General Assembly has had plenty of time to put forward a proposal that would take political self-interest out of the drawing of Congressional lines. Unfortunately, you have failed to do so. Only now when the citizens of Ohio are close to getting such a measure on the ballot are you even bringing a proposal forward--a proposal that does not really address all of the issues. In addition to the serious concern already noted, other concerns with SJR 5 include that it would dilute the voting strength of one party by allowing only the most populous counties to be divided many more times than would be necessary while requiring that all other counties be kept whole. While keeping constituent groups together is an overall goal of districting reform, this proposal sets requirements in stone that benefit one party and dilute the voting strength of the other party. SJR 5 sidelines the power of 3 statewide elected officials—governor, secretary of state and auditor--in the redistricting process. The power remains with the Ohio legislature in which one party currently holds vastly more seats than would be expected based on general voting patterns over the past 10 years. The goal is to get away from this one-sided influence in the drawing of the lines. The goal is getting away from the overwhelming influence of the state legislature, which is gerrymandered to the detriment of the people of Ohio. The goal is to create competitive districts where the politicians must pay attention to all of their constituents and not just the extreme elements on either side.

To try to usurp a true citizen’s initiative and confuse the issue is just plain wrong. The Fair Congressional Districts proposal is a good and fair proposal. SJR 5 only tweaks the current process, may serve to enshrine in our constitution favoritism of one party over another, and will not fix the problem of politicians picking their constituents rather than voters picking their politicians. In addition, placing SJR 5 on the May ballot can easily be used to confuse voters who may think that they are voting on the Fair Districts proposal.

Do the right thing. Take partisan politics out of the drawing of Congressional district lines. Rather than putting SJR5 on the May ballot, get behind the Fair Districts ballot initiative.

Thank you.

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