

Testimony Concerning SB 258 (11/2021)

Thank you for allowing me to provide testimony. My name is Debbie Dalke and I live in Bowling Green. The Ohio constitution has instructions for splitting counties, townships, etc. into different districts. The spirit behind this requirement is to keep communities intact, and I want to first address the importance of doing so. Bowling Green is about 25 miles south of Toledo, and I go to Toledo to shop, to eat, listen to music, and enjoy the parks. In 2014, a toxic algae bloom contaminated the drinking water in Toledo. Although the water in Bowling Green was still safe to drink, I was concerned, and personally impacted, by what was happening in my neighboring city.

About four years ago, my mother-in-law suffered a potentially life-ending stroke. We took her to the emergency room in Bowling Green, but the ER staff said she needed to go to Toledo. This is understandable; a small-town hospital can't be equipped for every type of medical crisis. She went to Toledo and survived. Regardless of political party, most people in Bowling Green rely on Toledo to fulfill some type of need. We want our political leaders to advocate for Toledo, although we may disagree about which policy is best.

Bowling Green and Toledo are also connected through their investment in higher education. Professors from institutions in Toledo and Bowling Green sometimes collaborate and support each other's programs. Residents of Toledo and Bowling Green could more effectively advocate for their mutual interests if they were in the same congressional district. However, the maps proposed by the senate separate these communities.

Senate Bill 258 also unnecessarily splits Lucas County, severing communities that border the western edge of Toledo from the city itself. The bedroom community of Ottawa Hills is disconnected from the city that provides many of its resources. Toledo's congressional district, District 9, sprawls east to Erie County, and then south to Morrow County. This district is not compact, and so is more likely to include communities that rarely interact. People in Morrow County, unlike the residents of Bowling Green and Ottawa Hills, are unlikely to be impacted by contaminated drinking water in Toledo or to travel to Toledo for emergency medical care. District 9 also does not appear to be contiguous.

I am also extremely concerned about the constitutional requirement that district plans not favor a political party. Senate Bill 258 is said to have six districts that could be won by either party, but Republicans outnumber the Democrats in all of these districts. In the last 10 years, about 45% of Ohioans voted for the Democratic candidate, but Republicans have the advantage in 13 of the 15 proposed congressional districts. Can you seriously claim that this bill does not favor a political party? You are nearly silencing the voice, and the preferences, of about half of Ohioans.

This redistricting process has not realistically allowed for public input. It has been difficult to get specific information about the maps, and meetings were scheduled with little advance notice. Senate Bill 258 was not made available to the public until after it was introduced in committee. We have had little time to evaluate the maps and prepare testimony.

Even with the delay in the census data, 47 citizen-constructed congressional maps were submitted to the Redistricting Commission by September 30. If private citizens could meet this constitutional deadline, why couldn't the General Assembly do so? Submitting a rudimentary map by this date would have allowed much more time for debate and revision.

As you move forward, please consider the maps that were submitted by the public. The three winners of the Fair Districts map-making contest (by John Hanger, Paul Nieves, and Riley Jones) all created districts that keep my community together, and they also received good marks for meeting the constitutional requirements. Don't travel the path taken by the Redistricting Commission and create maps that are doomed to be contested in the Ohio Supreme Court.