

Cayuga County Legislature looking at reapportionment, redistricting | Local News

Ryan Franklin ryan.franklin@lee.net

AUBURN — The Cayuga County Legislature is looking into exploring redistricting, reapportionment, and alternative forms of government for the county, as a committee Tuesday approved the hiring of an expert to explain how the processes could work.

The Legislature's Government Operations committee approved the hiring of Dr. Gerald Benjamin, of SUNY New Paltz's Benjamin Center, which assists local governments with applied research, evaluation, and policy analysis, to make a presentation to the Legislature for a fee of \$1,500 plus expenses.

As part of the upcoming 10-year US Census, the Legislature will be required to re-evaluate the apportionment for its weighted voting system. Currently, the Legislature uses a system where a legislator's vote receives a specified number of votes based on the population of their district.

Legislator Tim Lattimore, R-Auburn, said he believes the current system can be unfair, with just a few heavily populated districts overruling all the others.

“When our board passes the budget and the majority of the Legislature votes against it and it still passes because of the weighted vote I think is absolutely incorrect,” Lattimore said.

While the weighted voting issue has to be addressed, the Census also presents an opportunity to examine redistricting or switching to an alternative form of government for the county, such as, for example, a Legislature with an elected executive like neighboring Onondaga County.

Any changes to the size and shape of the county's districts or its form of government would require a number of steps, including a period of odd and even term lengths for legislators to align for one countywide election, as well as a number of separate and different referendums, County Attorney Frederick Westphal said.

Legislator Andrew Dennison, R-Ira, expressed concern at the idea of redistricting, especially regarding the potential for towns to be split and becoming “disenfranchised” by having their votes overruled by districts with more weighted points.

“Splitting a town is insane,” Dennison said.

Loaded: 0%

Progress: 0%

00:00

However, most towns are already split along a variety of school, congressional, state Assembly and Senate, and other districts, Lattimore noted. Meanwhile, county Legislature districts have remained the same for years despite sustained decreases in population.

All the Legislature should decide Tuesday, Legislator Chris Petrus, R-Brutus, said, is whether or not to hire Dr. Benjamin to explain what the process would entail. From there, the Legislature could decide what direction to go in.

“Let's just get the info first,” Petrus said.

Legislative Chair Patrick Mahunik, D-Auburn, who represents one of the smallest districts in the county and one that could possibly be phased out under redistricting, echoed Petrus' comments, saying it was an important discussion to have regardless of what gets decided later.

“If it makes sense, let's do it and if it doesn't then let's at least do our research and due diligence to say 'we looked at it and it doesn't make sense' or 'we looked at it, it makes perfect sense, voters you tell us what you think,’” Mahunik said.

Because the fee for Dr. Benjamin would need to be transferred from a budget account to a legislative account, the resolution still needs to be approved by the Ways and Means committee and later the full Legislature.

In other business, District 10 Legislator Joseph Bennett, D-Auburn, was unanimously reappointed and sworn in to his seat after briefly resigning in order to qualify for his pension from Cayuga Community College.

Bennett now must run in a special election, a year earlier than his elected term would have ended.

Staff writer Ryan Franklin can be reached at (315) 282-2230 or ryan.franklin@lee.net. Follow him on Twitter @RyanNYFranklin