Black officials will fight council merger

A group of local black elected officials will take whatever action is necessary to overturn the merger of the Metro Council, they said Tuesday.

The 10-member association had previously objected to a reapportionment plan drawn up for the Metro Council, approved by the voters last year.

Now the group has opposed the merger of the City and Parish councils into one Metro Council.

The U.S. Justice Department last month opposed both the reapportionment plan and the council merger because it said black voting strength would be diluted.

"They asked a lot of legitimate questions about the Metropolitan Council concept. I don't think they understood it," he said.

Meanwhile, Parish Attorney Lynne Williams, who met with Justice Department officials Monday, said the federal officials wanted the council to submit another reapportionment plan possibly with the addition of a predominantly black district.

But Williams said he was not sure if black representation would result in the Justice Department's withdrawing its objections to the council merger.

"We would let the citizens of the parish decide what they wanted to do," Williams said.

Frank Millican, chairman of the association, said he would ask the NAACP and the black officials to file suit if the Justice Department let the council negotiate its rights away.

"If we fail in our attempt, we will seek a remedy in federal court," he said.

Millican, a School Board member, has already filed a complaint with the NAACP regarding his personal opposition to the Metropolitan Council.

"We would be less than elected representatives if we didn't oppose this plan," he said.

"This consolidation reduces black representation from three of seven (City Council) to three of twelve (Metropolitan Council) with 70 percent of the black population of East Baton Rouge Parish residing within the city. Without question, this dilutes the voting strength of blacks," the letter said.

Millican said he was "perfectly satisfied" with the original 11-member council plan which had been submitted to the Justice Department before consolidation.

After the 1980 census, the City and Parish councils reapportioned themselves into 11 districts when population figures showed the parish council would lose one of its five seats.

But a proposition put before voters to merge the councils into a single 12-member Metro Council won approval last September and went into effect Jan. 1.

Council Administrator Don Nijoka, who also met with federal officials Monday, said the Justice Department told him that action under the Metro Council would be legally unenforceable until a new plan is approved.

Nijoka and Williams said they would ask the council to vote as a Metropolitan Council and as the former City Council until the question is resolved.