Blacks want three districts with unconsolidated councils

By MIKE DUNNE
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Black officials have told the Metro Council they prefer three black council districts in an unconsolidated government rather than four black districts in a metropolitan form of government.

That strategy was unveiled in a Tuesday night meeting that blacks maintained was not a legal meeting.

The council, however, voted to approach reapportionment under a metropolitan form of government and also to hold a special meeting on reapportionment on April 6 at 4:30 p.m.

At that time it will consider all plans that might be presented and also look at a Metro Council reapportionment plan.

George Eames, president of the local NAACP, registered his group's opposition to consolidated government and "we'll probably be going to court.

"You give us four and you got eight. To us, you haven't given us anything."

The meeting was supposed to be "informal" and it was — complete with the occasional biting comment and tension between the anti-consolidation and pro-consolidation form of government.

As outlined by state Rep. Joe Delpit, the black officials' strategy works this way:

Under the pre-consolidation forms of government, there were three black council members on the seven-member City Council.

By swinging one white vote, the coalition could block any city matter — affecting ordinances governing the majority of the parish's residents and about 75 percent of the city-parish budget.

Under the Metro Council form, even with a fourth black council seat, they would have to swing three more votes for a majority or two more to deadlock.

The council had previously reapportioned itself and lost a Parish Council seat, meaning that the blacks could have had three out of 11 total votes on parish matters as well as the three of seven on city-only matters.

The number of Parish Council seats is determined by the population of an average City Council seat — meaning that there would have not been enough population outside of the city limits to yield the traditional five seats.

In September, voters approved the Metro Council form of government, eliminating the 11-member plan. So the council reapportioned itself with a 12-member plan.

The U.S. Justice Department has objected to that plan and the Metro Council form of government.

The blacks hold that the metro form won't be approved and is illegal because it will dilute black voting strength and representation.

To reapportion on any other basis than the old city and parish councils is futile, they said.

"Dilution is the issue," Rep. Dick Turnley argued. "Dilution is involved, vis-a-vis, the reapportionment plan as well as the Plan of Government."

Just because the electorate approved the consolidation of the city and parish councils, doesn't make it right, they argued.

"The majority of people can vote us back into slavery, that would not be right."

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Eames said.

Mayor Pro Tem Mike Roubligue argued that under the non-consolidated form, rural districts were also disenfranchised.

But Councilwoman Pearl George — who bandied words with several council members during the one and one-half hour debate — said reapportioning under consolidation was useless.

"The Justice Department will not approve it — even if you get five blacks and there ain't no way," she said.

Councilman Don Ayres said that there had to be some direction to reapportionment and asked the council to vote on using the metro form as the guideline.

He proposed the council reapportion itself under consolidation, which he had opposed. He said it was approved by the voters and that was the direction that should be taken, no matter what his stance had been.

The council voted to do that, with only Ms. George and Jewel Newman — the two blacks in attendance — and Councilman Ben Peabody in opposition.

"This is what the Justice Department is concerned about," Ms. George said as the votes were tallied.

Newman questioned whether the meeting of the council was legal. That issue was never resolved, with the blacks feeling it wasn't and several council members feeling it was.

"There's too much dissent here among ourselves and in the audience," Roubligue said.

He said there was "tension because some believe one way and others believe another way. We're supposed to be working together."

"We're not going to get anything done here tonight," he said.