Lawmakers submit 14 remap plans

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Baton Rouge voters might — or might not — retain their dominance of the 6th Congressional District as state politicians haggle over the best way to create a majority black district in New Orleans.

Lawmakers submitted 14 bills for redrawing congressional districts during the first day of a special legislative session Wednesday.

Only one would affect congressional boundary lines in East Baton Rouge Parish. But that map, if adopted, would split the parish almost evenly between two congressional districts, weakening its traditional dominance over the 6th District represented by U.S. Rep. Henson Parish.

Fast-paced political maneuvering will decide which plan is adopted.

"It's a fluid situation," said Sen. Thomas Hudson, D-Baton Rouge. "But I'm optimistic we'll be successful in keeping Baton Rouge whole."

"I feel it will be possible to deal just with New Orleans" and neighboring districts, said Senate President Samuel Nunez, a major participant in the reapportionment process.

Other interested parties, including two congressmen, agreed that only the New Orleans area need be affected by the Legislature's second attempt at drawing district lines used to elect Louisiana's representatives to Congress.

But there is precedent for dividing Baton Rouge voters between two districts.

Two years ago the Legislature nearly adopted a map that would have transferred the northern part of East Baton Rouge Parish into the 6th Congressional District represented by U.S. Rep. Gillis Long, D-Alexandria.

When Gov. Treen, for other reasons, threatened to veto that plan, lawmakers settled for a map that left Baton Rouge largely intact, slicing only a portion of the Scotlandville area into the 8th District.

Two months ago, a three-judge federal panel threw out that compromise plan on the grounds it diluted the voting power of minorities in New Orleans. Black groups charged that the mostly black city was split between two mostly white districts to deny blacks a voting majority in any district.

Treen called the Legislature into special session to satisfy the court's objections.

Only the New Orleans area need be affected to comply with the court. The district lines in the Baton Rouge area may remain intact.

Lawmakers apparently have accepted the judges' demand to give black Louisiana voters a chance to elect one of their own to Congress for the first time in more than a 100 years.

Every plan contained in the bills filed Wednesday would combine black neighborhoods in New Orleans to create a 2nd District with a majority-black population — 54 percent to 58.6 percent, depending on the plan.

Even state Rep. Emile "Peppe" Bruneau, D-New Orleans, who strongly opposed creation of a black-controlled district in the 1981 reapportionment session, filed a bill that would seem to meet the guidelines set by the court.

The debate will center instead on a tug-of-war between two major interests not concerned with the racial issue.

In order the create a majority-black district in New Orleans, the 1st District, which was centered in the city, must be shifted more into Jefferson Parish.

Jefferson Parish politicians and their backers want to create a 1st District controlled as much as possible by Jefferson Parish voters, rather than allow the parish to be sliced into two or three districts, comprising a minority of the population in each district.

First District U.S. Rep. Bob Livingston, R-New Orleans, and Republican interests want to prevent his district from being carved up any more than necessary.

"We're playing defensive," said Livingston, who was at the Capitol Wednesday to lobby lawmakers toward his side of the issue.

"There are about 40 plans drawn right now," he said. "Some of them are good for me and some of them are not good for me."

Also at the Capitol were Jefferson Parish Assessor Lawrence Chehardy and District Attorney John Mamoulides, architects of the efforts to give Jefferson Parish maximum influence in deciding who is elected to Congress from the 1st District.

In his opening-day address to the Legislature, Treen said he is backing a plan he considers "fair, equitable, (and) meets the federal regulations...."

Treen did not identify his plan, but administration sources identified his plan as a bill filed by Sen. Tom Casey, D-New Orleans. The plan is similar to others in that it creates a majority-black district and does not split the Baton Rouge area any more than it is now split between the 6th and 8th districts.

Gov.-elect Edwin Edwards, who has considerable influence with the lame-duck Legislature now in session, has not yet said whether he will support a particular plan.