Roemer signs remap plan
Legislators close out session

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Gov. Buddy Roemer ended a stalemate over legislative reapportionment Sunday night and agreed to a plan he doesn't like, but which he said is probably the best lawmakers can do.

With Roemer's assurance he would sign a compromise plan for redistricting key Senate districts, the House and Senate adopted conference committee reports and then recessed to make sure Roemer signed the bills.

Once the governor signed the House and Senate plans, both chambers adjourned sine die, ending the eight-day special session 3½ hours before the midnight deadline for action.

At a news conference after signing the redistricting plans, Roemer said he had considered vetoing the measures but was dissuaded by three things:

- The Senate plan is better than one he vetoed only a few weeks ago because it does not carve up the Lake Charles area as badly as the prior Senate plan.
- Both the Senate and House plans can probably meet U.S. Justice Department scrutiny under the federal Voting Rights Act.
- Vetoing the bills would have set up a court fight over whether resolutions passed by the House and Senate were sufficient to reapportion the Legislature. In such a case, Roemer said, even if a court said the resolutions did not have the force of law, the court also probably would order them into effect as the last expression of the Legislature's intent.

If the Legislature gets U.S. Justice Department approval and avoids a protracted legal fight in the courts, qualifying is scheduled for Sept. 3-5 and the primary election is set for Oct. 19.

Sen. Dennis Bagnerris, D-New Orleans, said the Justice Department has not provided any timetable for reviewing the reapportionment plans to make sure that black voting strength is not diluted.

However, Bagnerris, who chaired the reapportionment committee in the Senate, predicted federal lawyers will complete their review within 10 days.

"I fully expect Justice to sign off on it," Bagnerris said.

After a day of closed-door negotiations and conference calls with the U.S. Justice Department on Sunday, Roemer said he doesn't think the final reapportionment plans are as good as they could be, but that the House and Senate "on balance...did the best possible job they could."

Although he said he doesn't like some details in the plans, Roemer said he is pleased with them because they will allow legislative elections to proceed this fall as scheduled and because they increase minority representation in the Legislature.

"Unlike most (legislative reapportionments) I've seen, Louisiana has done its duty both in terms of the number (of new minority seats) and the spirit," Roemer said. "The credit for that goes to members of the Legislature. And the difficulty of doing that cannot be overestimated."

"Whatever you say about this plan, the next Legislature of this great state will reflect more closely the geographical and racial presence in this state than ever before."

--- Gov. Buddy Roemer

The next Legislature of this great state will reflect more closely the geographical and racial presence in this state than ever before.

Roemer and Bagnerris agreed that the experience of the last few months is an indication that the Legislature should not be charged with reapportioning itself.

Both said they would like to see some sort of independent body given the task, and Roemer said he has asked Kay Kirkpatrick, an attorney on his staff, to begin research on how other states handle their redistricting chores.

Roemer said he hopes to be back next fall with a proposed constitutional amendment to set up a different way to do the job. However, he said he does not have a pre-conceived notion of what the best approach might be.

The reapportionment acts finally approved for the Senate keep things pretty much like they were when Roemer vetoed the Senate measure. He claimed at the time that it disrupted areas in southwest and northeast Louisiana.

Roemer said the bills he signed into law were an improvement over what came out of the Senate last month. He indicated the new Senate plan does a better job of keeping traditional communities whole and of giving members "of the team I worked so closely with" in the Senate a chance to run for office and make a case to the voters.

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The Senate plan keeps Sen. Armand Brinkhaus, D-Sunset, in a majority white district and creates a black majority district in St. Landry, Lafayette, St. Martin and Iberia parishes.

In protecting incumbents from being tossed in the same district and keeping Brinkhaus out of the majority black district, the plan pushes the Lafayette area districts westward into Calcasieu Parish and the open district held by the late Jack Doland of Lake Charles.

Sens. Cecil Picard, D-Maurice, and Allen Brinkhaus, D-Lafayette, are kept out of the same district.

The House and Senate returned at 2 p.m. Sunday to continue negotiations with Roemer, with Senate leaders meeting with him at the mansion until late afternoon. It was around 7 p.m. before the House and Senate voted in support of the reapportionment plans — passed in the form of two almost identical bills, each containing descriptions of the affected House and Senate districts.

Senate President Sammy Nunez said that in the meeting with Roemer, the governor “came around,” realizing that little could be done to avoid the splintering of Calcasieu Parish and assure preserving the political life of Sen. John Ensminger, R-Monroe, who is in a district favorable to Sen. Willie Crain, D-Monroe.

Roemer realized “there’s no other way to do it,” Nunez said.

It took two days to convince him, however.

Lawmakers had left the State Capitol Friday night with a broadly recognized understanding that Roemer had signed off on the Senate and House plans.

They arrived at the Capitol Saturday morning to discover that Roemer had changed his mind and was threatening a veto if he didn’t get his way.

“Roemer held the upper hand. He was not in jeopardy, we were,” Nunez said.

Later, during a news conference with Roemer and others, Nunez thanked Roemer for his involvement in the process, saying the governor’s intervention yielded a better Senate plan.

Once Roemer got involved in the process, he became the focal point for changes in the plan and, as a result, ended up taking a lot of heat that he probably didn’t need to take, Nunez said.

The final accommodations Sunday included slight revisions in Calcasieu Parish in restoring the district of Sen. James Cox, D-Lake Charles, to a larger percentage of blacks, from 19 to 30 percent, to avoid splitting a black community.

Bagneris said splitting up black voters in a traditional community in the Cox district presented “a possible Justice Department problem” that could lead to the rejection of the redistricting plan.

After Bagneris’ explanation, Cox was still unhappy, claiming Bagneris had not lived up to the agreement on four precincts in the area.

“I indicated to you there would be no changes made” in those four precincts, Bagneris said.

The Senate approved the reapportionment bills by identical 29-5 votes when it adopted conference committee reports that included the revisions to the Senate proposal.

The House approved the conference committee reports by votes of 62-27 on the bill with the House plan on the top and 62-28 for the bill with the Senate plan on top.

Nunez said Bagneris will take the plans to the Justice Department in Washington on Monday and that both the Senate and House will intervene in a lawsuit pending over prior reapportionment efforts so the plans can be presented to the court.

If the reapportionment plans are finally approved by the Justice Department as required by the Voting Rights Act, then the 144-member Legislature could have as many as 38 black members, based on the likelihood that black candidates will be elected in substantially black majority districts.

The Senate plan contemplates nine black majority districts. The House plan projects 26 black representatives.

The Senate plan creates nine black majority districts, up from five. One of the new black districts is in the Baton Rouge area which, like Lake Charles and other urban areas, finds itself splintered into more districts.

Baton Rouge currently has three Senate districts totally and one mostly within the parish.

The Senate bill has East Baton Rouge with two districts totally in the parish, two with a majority of the voters in the parish and two more with smaller parts of the parish attached to districts that are mostly rural districts.

When all of this year’s reapportionment efforts are computed, the House has increased the number of majority black districts — with black voter registration large enough to elect a black candidate — from 15 to 26. Two of those districts are in the Baton Rouge area.

The House created the additional majority districts as required and never got caught up in the Senate-Roemer political conflict.