Some say remap won't assure more black influence

By CARL REDMAN
and BILL MCMANON
Capitol news bureau

Black legislators seeking greater representation in the Louisiana Legislature made extraordinary gains during months of work, but the reapportionment plan adopted Sunday may not give them the positive results they want.

Although the latest reapportionment plan nearly doubles black seats in the Legislature, black voters may not get that much more influence. That's the assessment of several Baton Rouge area lawmakers.

In drawing more predominantly black districts, the Legislature was forced to draw many districts that are more heavily white. And, that could lead to greater racial polarization in the next Legislature.

Another result is that black lawmakers may seek to please white voters in their constituencies, several of those interviewed also said.

However, black lawmakers said their positions within the legislative hierarchy may be strengthened by their moving into committee and other leadership positions.

Revised reapportionment acts providing more black majority districts, approved in the special legislative session that ended Sunday, are expected to be hand delivered to the U.S. Justice Department on Tuesday.

The federal department will check the submissions to assure they meet objections filed earlier with the Legislature. Such review — termed preclearance — is a requirement of the 1965 Voting Rights Act to assure the changes do not dilute black voting strength.

The plans sent to the department increase black majority Senate seats from five to nine, and House seats from 15 to 26.

Among those interviewed in the last hours of the legislative session was Sen. Mike Cross, D-Baker, who said influence in the Legislature is not measured in the number of minority members in the House and Senate. Black voters sometimes are better off having an influence on white lawmakers than just electing more minority representatives, Cross said.

Sen. J.E. Junonville, D-Ventress, said black lawmakers who find themselves with more white voters in their districts will have to
develop a greater understanding of the white community.

"I think you’re going to see some very hotly contested elections in these majority black districts" and no guarantee that a black candidate will get elected, Jumonville said.

Jumonville explained that there may be a misconception that white lawmakers with “high black constituencies” vote on issues on the basis of race. Senators vote for what may appear to be black issues but are actually representing both black and white constituents.

For example, he said that his current district has 42 percent black voting strength — and will drop to 30 percent — but his votes for black interests have also been votes for whites. They, like black residents of his district, have been poor and dependent on government programs to help them, he said.

Rep. Kip Holden, D-Baton Rouge, said the increase in black membership in the Legislature will clearly have an impact on the outcome of many issues.

"When you begin to look at tax issues, you’ll find a general reluctance on the part of black legislators to support sales taxes," Holden said. "They’d like to look at some other areas to raise taxes. So, it reshapes the tax issue. It reshapes the budget."

Holden said the black increase also could influence some leadership positions in both chambers and change the philosophical bent of some committees.

Holden said one of the big questions is how many white incumbents will return next year. Some of those white lawmakers have been political friends of the 15 black representatives in the House, Holden said.

Rep. Sean Reilly, D-Baton Rouge, was not pleased with a reapportionment process that leaned so heavily on race.

"That’s the logical thing that happens when you go about redistricting and say that race is the only criterion that counts," Reilly said. "When you throw out other criteria, like political boundaries, physical boundaries like the Mississippi River and say, ‘All we care about is race,’ then what happens is you get very, very black districts and very, very white districts. The middle ground, the racially balanced districts, disappear."

Reilly said he’s concerned “that moderate politicians will go the way of the dodo bird” and that could spark more racial tension.

"I can only hope that the future holds better race relations in the House," Reilly said. "But, going down this road the Justice Department has asked us to go down doesn’t bode well."

Sen. Cleo Fields, D-Baton Rouge, said seating more blacks in the Legislature will inevitably give blacks a greater voice in major policy decisions.

For starters, Fields said, when more black lawmakers are added, one must expect an increase in the number of blacks in leadership positions and on powerful committees such as budget and tax panels.

"To some degree, we are going to determine whether bills get out of Senate committee," Fields said. "Senate committees are made up of seven people for the most part, and you’re going to see three and four blacks on committees."

The addition of more black lawmakers could put them in a position to determine the fate of sensitive issues — particularly issues requiring a two-thirds majority like taxes, Fields said.

Rep. Mike McClear, D-Baker, said as black districts become whiter, their lawmakers “better be” more responsive to their new white constituency.

While black lawmakers might be somewhat more responsive to a larger constituency, Cross said, "there’s a human tendency for them not to be. So it’s really going to depend upon the individual."

"I certainly think it’s correct to say there’s a greater polarization of the races with creation of more heavily white districts, Cross said.

Rep. Raymond "Jetson, D-Baton Rouge, said adding a dozen more black members to the House will bring great changes in the dynamics of the legislative process.

"There are a number of issues where 15 votes don’t quite decide the outcome, but where 27 will," Jetson said. "That’s not meant to suggest an obstructionist posture for the Legislative Black Caucus. It just means you are a part of this body that has to be noticed and has a great effect on the process."

Jetson said that while he hopes the increase in black presence in the Legislature does not intensify racial tension, he is concerned about that possibility.

"I think that is going to be the first challenge of the leadership of this body," Jetson said. "And, I don’t mean just elected leadership. I mean the natural leadership."

"The challenge is to make certain that when we come back in for the next four years that we don’t begin on a polarized note and that there will be a conscious effort to work together. The people of Louisiana need it desperately."

Jetson said that moderate legislators will hold the key to the process.