

POINT OF VIEW

Our View

Redistricting: The devil is in the details

Maybe Tuesday's public meeting on redistricting should be more about the impact of the process than the process itself. Maybe, but not likely.

That's because the proposed boundaries are not as "clean cut" as retired Wisconsin Judge Frederick Kessler envisioned when he was hired to reapportion city land into six wards from its present four wards.

Kessler, who was hired in 1996 to draw ward boundaries in the city's first redistricting effort, used his experience and discretion to spread the two dominant ethnic groups — Blacks and Hispanics — into separate wards, thereby, theoretically, increasing each group's chance of electing a representative that looks like them.

The merits of Kessler's work are open to debate — though it's likely to stand in the wake of L- and Z-shaped districts in states like Louisiana and North Carolina that have been ruled unconstitutional.

Most of Kessler's cuts appear correct, except for the boundary separating Ward 3, a heavily Hispanic ward, with the newly created Ward 5, in which Blacks are the dominant minority. (Keep in mind, neither minority dominates within the districts -- Whites comprise more than 50 percent of the voting-age populace). Downtown should fall within Ward 5 since the African-American community has a more established reputation with the area. Blacks migrated to Southern Nevada via the Union Pacific Railroad whose land abuts downtown. Many shuffled across the tracks in the morning and worked at downtown hotels and restaurants and shuffled back across the tracks at quitting time. Ward 3 Councilman Gary Reese isn't likely to fight hard for constituents in that area since Blacks nearly cost him his job in the previous election.

Back to the process, or better yet, the process' impact. Redistricting, in part, is done to quell racial politics. In theory, minorities are less likely to express outright dissatisfaction with elected officials. Conventional wisdom also holds that a minority official can be the mouthpiece for a race, a liaison between his or her people and the government and as a sign to the masses that the powers-that-be aren't against diversity. Kick theory and conventional wisdom out of the door.

When redistricting is bad, it's bad: In Louisiana, former Congressman Cleo Fields was elected to represent an L-shaped district that stretched from Shreveport to the state's eastern border and down to majority-black New Orleans. Though the district was majority black, it left Fields with little power statewide.

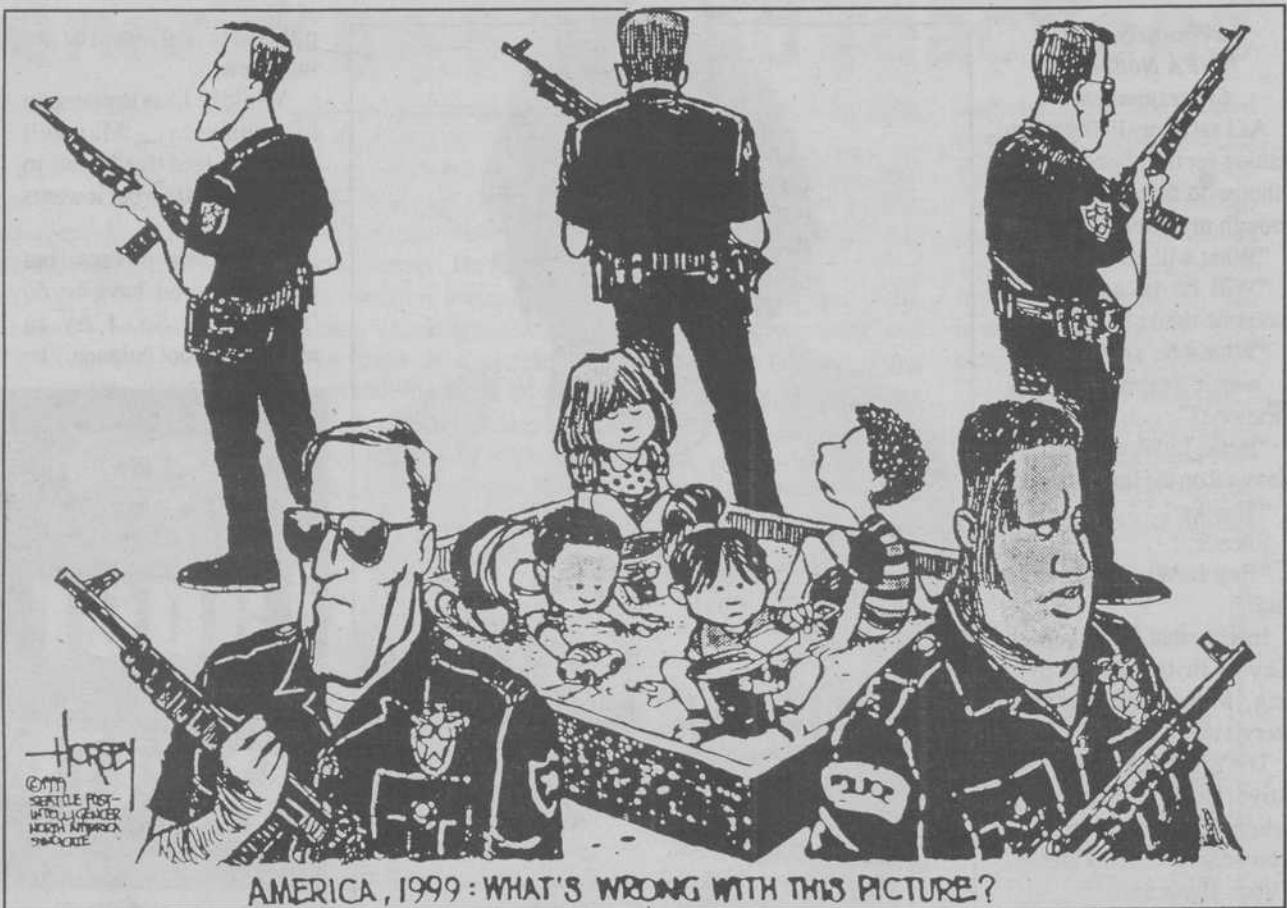
When redistricting is good, it's still rife with problems: Minority clout could be weakened even more with the process.

Though the council's main objective was increasing its commitment to citizens — lowering resident-capacity to between 70,000 and 80,000 as opposed to the upwards of 110,000 — make no mistake that race is involved.

Who's to say minority elected officials are best suited for the job. To wit, what about the qualifications for appointees? Is city experience the sole trait needed or is the emphasis on civic service, professional accomplishments, name recognition, wealth or some other criteria?

Which is more important, appointing a minority candidate, appointing a candidate that the city feels comfortable with or appointing someone citizens prefer? Will residents be allowed to weigh in on that discussion during Tuesday's meeting?

We would be wise to keep abreast of the process because the devil is always in the details.



AMERICA, 1999: WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?

People, not stats, can deliver fair census

J. Kenneth Blackwell
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Next year, the federal government promises to fix the census.

"Don't worry," say politicians and statisticians singing the praises of statistical sampling.

"Modern scientific methods" will find the people left out of previous counts — a disproportionate number of whom were minority children and families.

Worry. In the past, modern science has made false claims about everything from the safety of smoking to the inferiority of people of color. Excuse my skepticism, but I grew up in a neighborhood where what the government promised, and what it practiced, was as different as black and white.

So when I was appointed to a panel to oversee the Census Bureau, I looked hard at the results from the last time the government promised to fix the census with "modern scientific methods."

That was in 1990. Like today, there was a political firestorm over whether to use "statistical sampling" to find the people the census missed.

Statistical sampling is like polling — statisticians take a small (less than one percent) sample of the U.S. population. They use the results to estimate how many people are in each state, city, neighborhood, and block.

People who wanted to use sampling insisted it was the

only way to fix the census in places where it has always been broken: Places like Laurel Homes, public housing in Cincinnati, and Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes, the nation's largest public housing community.

Counting people is also hard in the vast farmland of the Mississippi Delta, in Latino colonias along the Mexican border, in American Indian lands throughout the West and in Asian neighborhoods throughout the country.

Not surprisingly, the people who live in these areas often face barriers to economic opportunity. The census misses a larger percent of people in these neighborhoods than in most.

For example, when we looked hard at the 1990 sample, we found 783 neighborhoods where the census missed more than 10 percent of the people. In many, the census missed 20, 30, 40 percent or more of the population. Most of the people in those neighborhoods — about 60 percent — were Black, Latino, Asian or American Indian. These are the places needing the most attention — the neighborhood's sampling is supposed to make whole.

However, when we examined what would have happened if sampling had been used, we found that these neighborhoods would have remained heavily undercounted. Sampling generally added a few people,

but never enough to fix the problem. The average undercount in these neighborhoods before sampling was 37 percent. After sampling, it was 34 percent.

It turns out "modern scientific methods" mostly add people to neighborhoods with good census counts — or to those where the census mistakenly counts too many people. In the 1990 sample, 75 percent of the people added through sampling would have been added to neighborhoods where more than 90 percent of the people were already counted. Alarming, almost 20 percent of the people added were to neighborhoods that were overcounted.

All these numbers add up to this: sampling alone has no hope of correcting large undercounts common to African-American, Latino, American Indian and Asian neighborhoods. Anyone who relies on statistical adjustment to make their neighborhood whole will be

disappointed.

When Washington experts fail (that is to say, most often), turn to local experts. If you want to find out how many people live in a neighborhood, ask someone who lives or works there.

For the last year, my colleagues on the Census Monitoring Board and I have done just that. We visited the Menominee Indian Reservation in Wisconsin, Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago, Latino colonias in Texas, farms throughout the Mississippi Delta, and other neighborhoods across the country.

Every place we went, we found local experts who knew the area better than anyone from Washington ever could. In Wisconsin, it was Chief Apesanahkwat. In Chicago, it was Tyrone Galtney and Levi Nawls, Robert Taylor residents who work with neighborhood kids, and the Rev. Herbert Martin of the nearby Progressive

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