



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Thomas F. O'Mara

Senator O'Mara's weekly column 'From the Capitol' ~ for the week of July 19, 2021 ~ 'Public input holds out hope for a better, fairer process'

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The intent is for a process that is more open and transparent. The goal is to give citizens a fairer and more representative government that best reflects their own communities and the regions where they live, work, and raise their families.

Senator O'Mara offers his weekly perspective on many of the key challenges and issues facing the Legislature, as well as on legislative actions, local initiatives, state programs and policies, and more. Stop back every Monday for Senator O'Mara's latest column...

This week, "Public input holds out hope for a better, fairer process"

In 2014, New York State voters overwhelmingly approved a referendum on the ballot to amend the State Constitution and put the once-every-decade legislative redistricting process into the hands of a new "Independent Redistricting Commission" (IRC).

That process gets underway in earnest this week when the IRC begins a series of nine virtual public hearings between now and August 12th to determine what congressional and state legislative districts will look like for the next ten years beginning in 2022.

While it may not be the most attention-grabbing process, it will fundamentally influence the future of local regions for the next decade.

Consequently, I hope that local community leaders and citizens will pay attention, as well as take part and provide input.

Background: Once every decade, following the Census, New York State redraws the maps for congressional and state legislative districts to reflect population and demographic changes. Heading into 2014, this “redistricting” process was widely recognized and highly criticized as an exercise in behind-closed-doors deal-making controlled by state legislative leaders. The legislation advancing the 2014 statewide referendum, which I strongly supported and voted for, sought to create a more transparent and accountable process, one that would diminish the overriding influence of special interests and political leaders.

We’ll see how that plays out in the weeks and months ahead - and there are plenty of observers who still have their doubts that this new process will effectively get the politics out of the process, so to speak - but, here at the start at least, the new process will provide an opportunity for greater public input than ever before.

The centerpiece of the 2014 reform was the creation of the IRC. One of the key reforms was the upcoming public hearings agenda to collect public input on what individual citizens, community groups, leaders in business, education, economic development, environmental conservation and so many other areas would like to see best reflected in the maps that determine the demographics and direction of their federal and state representation.

In announcing the IRC’s new website (www.nyirc.gov) and the virtual hearings schedule, Commission Chair David Imamura said, “We are thrilled to be embarking on New York’s first independent redistricting effort. However, this process will only work if the public makes its voice heard. We have created a process that we hope maximizes the opportunities for all New Yorkers to describe their communities and articulate how their districts can be improved.”

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raise their families.

The new IRC website allows citizen interaction. It allows you to sign up to participate in the hearings or to submit written testimony. According to the IRC, you must sign up through the web portal for the regional hearing encompassing your specific community. The hearing for the Southern Tier/Central NY region is scheduled for Monday, August 9, beginning at 2:00 p.m. The Finger Lakes/Western NY hearing is scheduled for Thursday, August 12 at 2:00 p.m.

For more information, including how to participate and/or submit testimony, go to: www.nyirc.gov/meetings.

Following this first round of virtual hearings, the IRC is required to release its first statewide redistricting proposal to the public on September 15th. The IRC will then schedule additional, constitutionally required hearings in the fall before releasing final maps for legislative approval in early 2022.

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