

Redistricting map foes say they've passed first test

Still need to reach 55,736 signatures to trigger referendum

By [Michael Dresser](#), The Baltimore Sun

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Opponents of the congressional redistricting plan devised by Gov. Martin O'Malley and General Assembly leaders said Thursday they have passed the first test for putting the measure on the November ballot by gathering enough voters' signatures to keep the effort going.

The group filed an estimated 25,000 signatures Thursday night, well more than the 18,579 needed by June 1. If enough signatures are certified by the state elections board, the challengers will have until July 1 to collect the remainder of the necessary 55,736 signatures.

If they achieve that total, voters in November would have an opportunity to accept or reject the redistricting plan, which each state must devise once a decade based on the results of the U.S. Census count.

Standing in front of 10 boxes filled with petition forms, Republican Del. Neil Parrott of Washington County said opponents of the map would "go full speed ahead during June" with a goal of collecting 75,000 signatures to ensure a sufficient "buffer zone" to withstand challenges.

O'Malley and the leaders of the House and Senate, all Democrats, drew a map in which districts wind from county to county in an effort to maximize their party's advantages. In addition to protecting the six Democratic incumbent representatives in the U.S. House, the map gives the party a good chance of seizing the 6th District seat held by Republican Rep. Roscoe Bartlett.

The plan survived several court challenges. Judges decided that while the map was a clear example of partisan gerrymandering, that alone did not make it illegal. In an opinion dismissing one of the suits, Judge Paul V. Niemeyer of the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals described Democratic Rep. John Sarbanes' 3rd District as "reminiscent of a broken-winged pterodactyl, lying prostrate across the center of the state."

Parrott, who organized the petition drive, said that while the effort was slow in getting off the ground, voter interest surged over the past week. "Any time we would put a map in front of people, they see how bad the map is and they want to sign," he said. He said the group raised \$41,200 for its drive, and has spent \$27,700 so far.

Under Maryland law, the redistricting plan, like most bills passed by the General Assembly, can be petitioned to referendum by gathering signatures equivalent to 3 percent of the vote in the previous gubernatorial election.

If opponents reach their goal, the redistricting plan would join two other measures on the November ballot. Last year, opponents of a bill allowing some illegal immigrants to pay in-state tuition at state universities gathered enough signatures to put that law up for a vote. This week, foes of same-sex marriage submitted 122,481 signatures, likely assuring a referendum on that law.

The ballot could become even more crowded if Assembly leaders and O'Malley reach consensus in June on a plan to expand casino gambling in Maryland. If that occurs, the governor has said he would call a special session July 9 to vote on a bill that would put a casino question up for a popular vote.

If the redistricting plan were to be overturned in a referendum, the districts drawn for this year's election would remain in effect for two years, but the General Assembly would be required to draw a new map before the 2014 election.

The elections board has until June 20 to certify that enough valid signatures have been submitted. In the petition drive last year that put the immigrant tuition bill, known as the DREAM Act, on the ballot, the signature rejection rate was roughly 20 percent. According to the elections board, its forms have been redesigned and education efforts have been stepped up since then in an effort to reduce the percentage of signatures ruled invalid.

Parrott recalled that Maryland voters rejected a redistricting plan once before, in 1962. In that case, he said, the governor and legislature failed to pass a new plan and the courts redrew the districts in time for the 1966 election.

If the current redistricting plan fails, Parrott said, he believes the legislature will adopt a plan that creates three districts in which minorities are in the majority. Maryland now has two such districts, represented by Reps. Elijah Cummings and Donna Edwards. For Republicans, that would have the advantage of making it more difficult to draw seven districts in which Democrats have an edge.

In gathering the redistricting petitions, Republican activists drew on a resource that is becoming increasingly influential in state politics — the website MDPetitions.com. The site, which Parrott operates, makes it easier to collect signatures in a way that complies with the complex rules governing the process.

MDPetitions.com played a role in gathering the signatures that put the college tuition and same-sex marriage questions on the ballot. But by helping clear the first hurdle for a redistricting referendum, Parrott has shown that the site can also be effective in gathering signatures over less emotionally charged issues.

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