

Redistricting petition drive meets signature goal

More than 3,000 names yet to be checked

by Daniel Leaderman, Staff Writer, *The Gazette*. Published: July 11, 2012

Critics of Maryland's new congressional districts have collected enough valid signatures to place the map before voters this fall, according to the state Board of Elections.

A petition drive that ended last month has produced 55,756 valid signatures as of about 1:30 p.m. Wednesday, with about 3,400 signatures yet to be checked. Nearly 7,000 signatures had been rejected, according to the board.

At least 55,736 valid signatures were needed in order to place a measure on the ballot in November. If no successful legal challenge is mounted, the new districts will join referendums on same-sex marriage and the Maryland Dream Act at the polls.

Tony Campbell, president of Marylanders for Coherent & Fair Representation, which supported the drive, said he was pleased that opponents had gotten over this hurdle, but expected a legal challenge to the signatures from state Democrats.

David Sloan, executive director of the Maryland Democratic Party, dismissed the petition drive last week as a "desperate partisan power grab" and said in a statement that the party would consider its options to "protect the integrity the referendum process."

Last month, the Supreme Court summarily affirmed a U.S. District Court decision to uphold the new districts, which were adopted by the General Assembly last fall.

The new map split up Montgomery County, moved Democratic Rep. Donna F. Edwards' 4th District into Prince George's and Anne Arundel counties, extended Rep. Christopher Van Hollen Jr.'s (D) 8th District into Frederick and Carroll counties, extended the 3rd District represented by Rep. John Sarbanes (D) into Montgomery from the Baltimore area and pushed the Republican-held 6th District farther into Montgomery.

Some critics have acknowledged that generating voter support for repealing the map could be difficult because it's not a polarizing issue such as same-sex marriage. Others, such as Del. Neil Parrott (R-Dist. 2B) of Hagerstown, are confident that voters will want overturn the map once they see it. Parrott is chair of MDPetitions.com, which spearheaded the petition drive.

Whether or not a referendum would be successful was difficult to predict, said Rob Richie, director of the Takoma Park-based FairVote.org. But Maryland's convoluted map likely would generate an important public conversation about fair representation in general, he said.

In other referendum news, state Administrator of Elections Linda Lamone gave final confirmation Tuesday that the same-sex marriage law approved earlier this year would be on the ballot.

Opponents submitted more than 109,000 valid signatures in May, and state officials are not even undertaking the verification of a second batch of nearly 40,000 signatures submitted in June.