



## From Out Here: On Redistricting

By Jack M. Geller, Ph.D.

March 2001

Rural legislators and advocates alike are running scared of the “R” word. No, not “Recession,” but “Redistricting.” You know, that statutorily required activity every 10 years when demographers, geographers and politicians come together to redraw both the congressional and state legislative district boundaries. It’s something that rural legislators dread, as more often than not, rural districts get geographically larger and larger and rural legislators get fewer and fewer. But redistricting is the law. As long as our republic is based upon the principle of “one person, one vote” and not “one acre, one vote,” we must periodically adjust the boundaries of our congressional and legislative districts as the nation demographically shifts and geographically reconfigures.

Our current legislative boundaries are based upon the 1990 census, when it was determined that each legislative district should ideally contain approximately 32,600 residents to achieve equal representation across the state. But preliminary

estimates from the 2000 census suggest that our state has gained over 500,000 new residents since 1990. That suggests that now each legislative district should contain approximately 36,700 residents. Unfortunately, population growth did not occur evenly throughout the state. Therefore, when the new lines are drawn, some rural districts will get quite a bit larger as their boundaries stretch to find the necessary 36,700 residents to contain. Conversely, some of the districts that now encompass the tertiary suburbs of the Twin Cities will actually shrink and cluster closer together, to accommodate the population that has swelled over the past 10 years.

Probably the most profound statement I have heard on the impact of redistricting came from a rural member of the House of Representatives from northwest Minnesota. Speaking on a legislative panel at a conference on rural education in Crookston, he summed it up by acknowledging his two colleagues from the

House on the panel and noting, “...while there are three of us here today, there will only be two of us after the next election.” What he meant of course, was that as rural districts get larger and larger, legislators in once neighboring districts find themselves residing in the same district after redistricting. Consequently, it is not uncommon in the election following a redistricting to find two incumbent legislators running against each other for the same seat.

But for some reason rural advocates are particularly worried about this upcoming round of redistricting. I can’t count how many times I have heard rural legislators and advocates say that we have to pass this program or that policy now, because after redistricting, urban interests will dominate the legislature. So I decided to conduct a little historical research to determine if this looming battle between rural and urban interests really hinges on the outcome of this upcoming round of redistricting.

To do this, I partitioned all legislators into three categories:

- *Twin Cities Legislators* were defined as those that represent districts (and therefore live) in the counties designated by the U.S. Census Bureau as the Twin Cities' Metropolitan Statistical Area;
- *MSA Legislators* were defined as those that represent all or part of Metropolitan Statistical Area counties outside of the Twin Cities MSA (such as Rochester, St. Cloud or Duluth);
- *Rural Legislators* were defined as those that represent districts exclusively in rural Minnesota.

Today in the Minnesota State Legislature there are 201 legislators: 55 percent or 111 individuals are *Twin Cities Legislators*, 14 percent or 27 are *MSA Legislators*, and 31 percent or 63 are *Rural Legislators*. So as it stands today, approximately 70 percent of the legislators in St. Paul represent all or part of the metropolitan counties throughout Minnesota.

However, some 40 years ago in 1961, the composition of our state

legislature was quite different. Back then there were 199 state legislators: only 26 percent or 51 members were *Twin Cities Legislators*, 8 percent or 16 were *MSA Legislators*, and 132 members, or 66 percent, were *Rural Legislators*. So if my math is correct, in the past 40 years *Metro Legislators* have more than doubled in number (+118 percent), *MSA Legislators* have increased by 69 percent and *Rural Legislators* have been cut roughly in half (-52 percent), all before this current round of redistricting.

It is also important to understand that across those 40 years our rural and urban geography has changed as well. In 1961 the Twin Cities Metropolitan Statistical Area was comprised of five counties; today it contains 11 counties. In 1961 there were only two MSA counties outside the Twin Cities; today there are seven. So we must also understand that labels like rural and urban are moving targets as well. A professor at the University of Illinois once suggested that one way to accurately reflect these shifts is to label all U.S. counties as either "urban," "rural," or "formerly rural." Well, maybe — but you get the point.

And speaking of points, so what exactly was the point of the above historical analysis? Well, it simply is a way to point out that the anticipated and feared shifts in the composition of the legislature after this upcoming round of redistricting really will be quite modest in comparison to the massive changes that have already occurred over the last 40 years. Let's be honest — there is no looming battle between rural and urban interests on the horizon. Truth be told, if there ever were such a battle, we (i.e., us rural folk) would have lost it years ago. So let's relax a little and reduce the hype.

Minnesota is a wonderfully diverse state, blessed with a diverse economy, landscape and culture. If Minnesota is going to continue to lead the nation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in health status, educational achievement, and quality of life, it will do so as one Minnesota, not a house divided. Urban legislators know it, rural legislators know it, and so do you and I.

*(Dr. Geller is President of the Center for Rural Policy and Development at Minnesota State University, Mankato. He can be reached at [jack.geller@mnsu.edu](mailto:jack.geller@mnsu.edu).)*