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Citizens' Advisory Board on Redistricting held first meeting

Having grown rapidly during the last decade – from 111,360 in the 2000 Census to 149,610 in the 2010 Census – Ellis County must draw new lines for its commissioner precincts. The redistricting process must adhere first to the Constitutional provision for equal protection – commonly referred to as “One Man, One Vote” – but must also meet the provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The process is being overseen by the law firm of Guinn and Morrison of Waco. Both attorneys are professors at Baylor University School of Law.

A Citizens' Advisory Board, appointed by the Commissioners' Court on March 14, 2010, to assist with the project, held its first meeting on Wednesday, April 27 in the historic Courthouse.

Members of the committee are Rudy Amor, Sandy Anderson, Bob Beakley, Linda Dunn, Jane Hamilton, Tony Medina, Allen Oakley, Paul Perry, Richard Reno, Brenda L. Sexton, John Tabor, and Diane Threadgill.

“Your input is crucial; you were selected because your Commissioner knows something about you,” said County Judge Carol Bush, who welcomed the committee before leaving them to their work. “You are committed people, well established in your respective communities. We are going to lean on that as we go through this very, very important process.”

Michael Morrison echoed her comments.

“The only thing we said was that you had to be representative (of the population) and well respected – that is the reason your Commissioner picked you,” he said.

Morrison opened the meeting with what he called “Redistricting 101,” introducing the statutes and Constitutional provisions governing the process, and instructed the committee on its responsibilities.

“Talk to your Sunday School class -- there are no limitations on who you talk to or what you can talk about,” he said, noting that the members of the committee should attend each of the public hearings that will be held in addition to visiting with residents of their respective communities.

“There will be people who are not comfortable talking to Judge Bush or to a Commissioner or to a

lawyer from Waco – but they will be comfortable talking to someone in this group, and we really need to know what is on peoples’ minds.”

Noting that some of the individuals present at Wednesday’s meeting were not members of the committee but simply interested members of the public, Morrison encouraged more such participation at future meetings.

Having met earlier in the afternoon in an informal workshop with the Commissioners’ Court, Morrison provided the committee members with the same information given to the members of the Court. Specifically, he handed out a set of maps with printed calculations of population distribution, including breakdowns by ethnic, racial and language minorities within each precinct. He included the current precincts as well as three proposed models for the new districts.

“To me, these are just numbers,” he said. “Did I move out a politically active group and move in a group that really doesn’t vote? If I did, I’ve weakened that precinct. You know that stuff – I don’t.”

In response to an inquiry from a committee member, Morrison said his firm is working toward being able to provide the maps and spreadsheets to the committee in electronic format. Another committee member requested breakdowns of individual voting precincts by ethnic, racial and language minority groups, while others were interested in road mileage information.

“Anything of substance that we send to anybody, we will send to all, including the Court,” Morrison said.

The committee is expected to meet with Morrison again in two to three weeks. All meetings are open to the public and will be posted on the bulletin board at the historic Courthouse, as well as on the County’s website at www.co.ellis.tx.us. The website includes a method by which any citizen can subscribe to automatic notification when new information is posted.