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**Capitol View
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**Redistricting Proposal on the Table, Lawmakers Need to Pay Attention**

When my boys were younger and ready to quibble over the last piece of cake, I would advise them to share. I would ask one to cut and the other to choose first. It took a while, but the cuts grew ever closer to equal as the practice continued.

Creative parenting? I like to think of it as common sense. It was a lesson applied numerous times and still the subject of family discussion. Common sense, imagine that.

Trying to equalize the size of Nebraska’s governmental boundaries every 10 years should be as simple. New figures from the U.S. Census require new district boundaries for the U.S. House of Representatives, Legislature, Public Service Commission, University of Nebraska Board of Regents and the state Board of Education. That task lies ahead this year.

To that end, Omaha Sen. John McCollister has offered a bill (LB107) called the Redistricting Act. He said it’s a compilation of the best practices of several redistricting bills introduced by a variety of senators over the last several years. McCollister says it’s essential that he and his colleagues get this right. He calls it one of the most consequential processes that senators undertake.

I agree. I’ve seen a few of these through the years, including one that caused the state Supreme Court to order a special session to concentrate on the single topic of redistricting and get it right. I’d rank redistricting right up there with the state budget and property tax relief. The budget because the state Constitution says that’s what lawmakers have to do. Property tax relief because I’m tired of all the fiddling and faddling and so ready for the Legislature to bite the bullet and fix the entire tax system.

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A tall order you say? Yes, it is, but if I ruled the Legislature that’s the only three things we’d discuss. Insert appropriate whining and “what abouts?” here. Listen to me. The budget has to be done, the state tax system is a mess and redistricting faces on-going criticism for being politically motivated. What’s the problem with that? McCollister explains it best. The citizens may attempt to remove the process from the Legislature through the initiative process and place it in the hands of an independent commission.

He told the Legislature’s Executive Board that a number of states have already adopted a commission model to remove partisanship from the process. And what could go wrong with an independent commission? Let me count the ways.

McCollister says his plan seeks to remove any consideration of political party affiliation, voter registration affiliation numbers and political history from decisions about congressional, legislative and other district boundaries. The goal is political neutrality and the process has to be credible and fair.

Gone would be the ability of the full Legislature to amend boundaries agreed to by the redistricting committee following public hearings in all three congressional districts. The full Legislature would then have to adopt a final set of boundaries.

Sounds simple enough. Among other provisions, McCollister’s bill would require that maps be drawn using politically neutral criteria and using only data and demographic information from the U.S. Census. The bill would prohibit consideration of residents’ political affiliation or registration and previous voting data.

In case you weren’t paying attention last year, amid the protests and the pandemic and the divisive national election, there’s been a delay in the census. The Census Bureau has announced that it will not release the data states use to draw their legislative maps until the end of September — months later than the usual springtime release.

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That gives states less time to draw maps, get feedback, resolve the ensuing lawsuits and enact their new plans before the next election.

The McCollister proposal calls for data used in the redistricting process to be made available to the public and at least one public hearing held. Once a map is created, only amendments to correct technical errors would be allowed and the governor would be required to call a special session if the Legislature fails to adopt new maps.

If the data isn’t transparent about what and why, there is a great risk of sowing distrust in the process, which could, once again look very partisan.

I like what Preston Love Jr. of Omaha had to say about the process. Redistricting lines should be drawn “not for party, but for people.”

At this point, look for redistricting to come in a special session, perhaps in October, so the official 2020 Census figures can be used.

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