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Suffolk OKs New Districts

Pits 2 Democrats in 8th District; plan faces court scrutiny today

By Emi Endo

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On a party-line vote, Suffolk lawmakers yesterday approved a plan for new legislative districts that would pit two incumbent Democrats against each other.

Forced by a federal court to meet, all 10 Republicans voted to pass a modified version of one of five competing proposals. Seven Democrats voted no and one abstained.

In a lawsuit brought by Hispanic and African-American residents against the county over its failure until yesterday to adopt new district lines, U.S. District Judge Arthur Spatt in Central Islip had given legislators one last chance to break a deadlock.

Spatt suspended legislative rules that would have prevented the legislators from taking action yesterday and said the court would impose a redistricting plan if they didn't agree to one themselves.

Both sides in the case are scheduled to appear in court again this afternoon.

Attorney William Wexler, of Babylon, said he would challenge the plan on behalf of the eight Democratic legislators. "We're going to be asking the court to . . . allow the legislature to proceed in a more orderly fashion," he said.

Frederick Brewington, the Hempstead lawyer representing the plaintiffs, indicated they may not accept the plan. "There are serious questions that we are evaluating now as to the propriety of their actions in relation to the Voting Rights Act," he said.

The approved plan, sponsored by Legis. Andrew Crecca (R-Hauppauge), would throw Legis. Ginny Fields (D-Oakdale) and Legis. William Lindsay (D-Holbrook) into the 8th District, much of which Lindsay currently represents. It would create a new 9th District with no incumbent, covering much of Brentwood and Central Islip. The district

would have a population 45 percent Hispanic and 20 percent black.

After the meeting, Fields said she was considering either moving into the adjoining district now held by Legis. Cameron Alden (R-Islip) to challenge him or running against Lindsay.

"I intend to continue being a legislator," she said.

County Executive Robert Gaffney has until next month to sign the plan into law or veto it. "We're required to hold a public hearing by law, which we will do, and listen to all testimony before making a decision," said Deputy County Executive Peter Scully.

Although renegade Republicans had sided with Democrats in January to oust Paul Tonna (R-West Hills) and elect Legis. Maxine Postal (D-Amityville) as leader of the legislature, the party-line vote yesterday showed that the coalition extended only so far. Democrats, for instance, failed in an attempt to recess the meeting to fashion a bipartisan compromise.