

Bellone vetoes redistricting map

Dems' plan 'would never have survived,' Suffolk executive says

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Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone vetoed a Democratic redistricting plan Wednesday, rescuing a compromise agreement with Republicans to redraw legislative district lines for the next decade.

The deal had appeared to collapse Wednesday afternoon after officials canceled a scheduled vote because they did not have enough support to pass the agreement.

But Bellone's veto Wednesday night resuscitated the deal, under which a bipartisan commission would redraw maps for all 18 legislative districts.

With the veto, Bellone, a Democrat, blocked a Democratic redistricting plan from taking effect Monday, giving his agreement with legislative Presiding Officer Kevin McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst) a better chance of passing the legislature.

Bellone told Newsday he vetoed the Democratic plan because it "would never have survived" legal challenges that it violated the county charter.

"What we have ultimately now is a process that is legally sustainable and will definitely result in equitable maps that reflect the demographic realities of the county," Bellone said.

McCaffrey said after the veto the "truly bipartisan agreement" would provide for a "fair, open and transparent process."

"It's truly the right thing to do," McCaffrey (R-Lindenhurst) said of the agreement.

Voting rights advocates had criticized the agreement, calling it a "backroom deal" that could violate voting rights laws by undoing fair maps and leading to gerrymandering.

About 40 groups and 500 individuals had signed a letter urging Bellone to sign the Democratic redistricting plan into law.

"I'm concerned what this means for communities of color," Minority Leader Jason Richberg (D-West Babylon) said after Bellone announced his veto. "They put their trust in us to get this done. We got it done. And their voices were silenced."

Civil rights attorney Frederick Brewington said the veto "is a dagger aimed at the heart of hopes and opportunities long fought for. When you make deals

on promises and language that can't be kept and sacrifice to the rights of Black and brown voters as political real estate you shouldn't expect folks to say thank you."

The Democratic plan passed on Dec. 31, hours before Republicans took control of the legislature.

The measure, which had broad support from voting rights advocates and community groups, would have created four majority-minority districts, and kept similar communities within the same districts.

Backers said the plan would have created 18 districts evenly split between those that leaned Republican and Democratic.

The Democrats' plan also would have squeezed four Republican incumbents into two districts without requiring any Democratic legislators to run against each other.

Republicans and Bellone's county attorney, Dennis Cohen, said that plan violated the charter because the legislature did not have the authority to approve its own map before Feb. 1, the deadline for the bipartisan commission to propose district lines.

Former Presiding Officer Robert Calarco, a Patchogue Democrat who lost his race for reelection in November, said his office had to draw the maps because legislative leaders failed to appoint commission members by a Nov. 10 deadline.

The compromise deal would extend the commission's deadline from Feb. 1 to Aug. 1.

If the commission fails to complete its work by Aug. 1, including holding 12 public hearings, the Republican-led legislature will control creation of new district maps.

In a letter Wednesday, the 11 GOP caucus members said they were committed to approving maps reflecting Suffolk County's diversity.

The new maps will have a minimum of four "majority-minority" districts, the Republican lawmakers said.

Residents who identify as Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander or American Indian account for more than one-third of the county's population, according to the 2020 U.S. census.

Voting rights advocates had expressed concern that under Bellone's and McCaffrey's agreement, communities of color would be packed together or split apart — particularly if the commission were to fail to agree on new lines and the legislature drew its own maps.

Bellone said Wednesday:

"At the end of the day, I wouldn't support any process that is not fair and transparent and . . . produces equitable maps."