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HEADLINE: Court revises political map;
City loses seats, influence; Baltimore County gains;
Appeals judges eliminate shared Baltimore districts;
'Step backwards,' Willis says;
Barring a legal challenge, districts set for fall vote;
REDISTRICTING IN MARYLAND

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SOURCE: SUN STAFF

BODY:

Maryland's highest court released a drastically altered General Assembly map yesterday that cuts political representation from Baltimore and unravels a 10-year-old strategy to preserve the city's influence.

Responding to claims that Gov. Parris N. Glendening's redistricting map was unconstitutional, the Court of Appeals eliminated all districts that crossed the city line into Baltimore County. The districts were created a decade ago to forge connections between the rapidly shrinking city and its wealthier suburbs.

In their place, judges drew six senatorial districts entirely within Baltimore's borders, five of which have a majority African-American population.

Under the current General Assembly map, the Baltimore delegation contains 10 senators, with half representing only city residents and half also serving county constituents.

Baltimore County gains legislators under the court's map, and residents of Dundalk, divided in the governor's plan, have been reunited. The county will have five Senate districts entirely within its borders, up from three offered by Glendening.

Although the most significant changes are in the Baltimore region, the court altered political boundaries across the state, rejoining areas on the lower Eastern Shore and trimming the number of counties represented by Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller from four to two.

Barring a successful challenge in federal court, the plan will be the blueprint for the Sept. 10 primaries and Nov. 5 general election for all 188 General Assembly seats.

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"Clearly, the Baltimore region has benefited from shared legislative districts over the last decade," Glendening said, adding that the court map "imposes more changes on the citizens of Maryland than the plan submitted by the governor and legislature."

Maryland Secretary of State John T. Willis, a chief architect of the governor's plan, called the court decision "a step backwards" for the metropolitan area.

Critics of Glendening's redistricting proposal, who have long complained that the governor and legislative leaders were fixated on punishing their enemies and protecting friendly incumbents, said the court reversed many problems.

"Baltimore City got what the population says it should have," said M. Albert Figinski, an attorney representing several plaintiffs against the governor's plan. "I'm sure there is going to be a lot of moaning and groaning and sobbing and weeping, and I am sure powers that be in the state are going to challenge it."

Although the judges have yet to explain their concerns and remedies - a 54-page decision released yesterday mainly lists precincts for legislative districts and offers no rationales - the map contains strong clues. The number of districts that cross jurisdictional lines has been cut from 22 to 14.

Six judges concurred with the decision, with one opposed. Judge Irma S. Raker said the new map "raises serious concerns" under the Voting Rights Act. A full dissent was forthcoming, she said.

The court's decision triggered a flurry among incumbent lawmakers and their challengers who were struggling to digest its implications. Many will have to forge new alliances and create new tickets. In one case, the court created a Baltimore County district without an incumbent senator.

"There are going to be a lot of people practicing the art of cartography over the weekend," said Sen. Robert R. Neall, an Anne Arundel Democrat.

No legal challenges to the court plan were filed yesterday, and observers differed on whether any were forthcoming.

The court's plan maintains Glendening's proposal to create eight Senate districts within Montgomery County, the state's most populous jurisdiction, and to keep a new district in Prince George's County where a majority of voters are black. Statewide, there are 10 districts in which most voters are African-American, just as in the governor's plan, according to Willis.

In the Baltimore region, veteran senators will have to run against each other if they seek re-election, and the careers of several delegates will surely end.

The 42nd District, which for the past decade has included Northwest Baltimore and the Ruxton and Riderwood sections of Baltimore County, was shifted completely into the county and has no incumbent senator. The move puts both Sen. Barbara A. Hoffman, who is white, and Sen. Clarence W. Blount, who is black, in a 41st District that is 70 percent black.

Many political observers believe that Blount, 80, may retire. Hoffman said yesterday that she won't consider moving and will run for re-election. "I have represented these people for nearly 20 years," said Hoffman, chairwoman of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee. "I'm not going to walk away from Baltimore City."

Del. Lisa A. Gladden, seen by many as a likely successor to Blount, said yesterday that she was torn about running because of her respect for Hoffman.

"I don't know what I'm going to do," Gladden said. "If you want to run for a Senate seat, you have to run against the most powerful woman in Annapolis."

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Two other senators, Perry Sfikas and George W. Della Jr., would share the 46th District, as would five incumbent delegates vying for three spots.

Two politicians targeted by Glendening found themselves with a fresh lease on their political lives yesterday.

Sen. Clarence M. Mitchell IV, who is black, had been placed by the governor in a district with Della that was 53 percent black but had a historically poor turnout by African-American voters. Now, Mitchell is the lone incumbent in a revised 44th District that is 75 percent black.

The home of Sen. Norman R. Stone Jr. of Dundalk had, under the governor's map, been put in an Anne Arundel-based district. Under the court plan, Stone can run as the lone incumbent in the 6th District, which includes Essex, Dundalk and Edgemere. He said last night that he would seek re-election.

"Splitting up that district the way (the governor) did was unconscionable," Stone said. "We hung in there, and we won it."

Meanwhile yesterday, many city politicians decried the elimination of shared city-county districts. "It gives you a sense of one Maryland," said Del. Shirley Nathan-Pulliam of Baltimore. "Where the lines stop, the problems don't stop."

But their counterparts in the county said they would remain involved in city affairs.

"The city is still the engine of the state, so the county will work with them," said Del. James F. Ports Jr., the House Republican whip from Perry Hall.

In Howard County, the court made alterations that could weaken the election prospects of C. Vernon Gray, a black County Council member running for Senate against incumbent Sandra B. Schrader. The court redrew the district to keep it within Howard, reducing its black population.

Gray shrugged off the change yesterday. "It doesn't concern me in the least," he said. "It's still a competitive district. I've worked here for 20 years, and people know the leadership capabilities I have."

Glendening crafted his proposal after a commission composed of Willis, Miller, House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. and others spent a year touring the state for the once-a-decade redistricting process.

Glendening released his map in January, and it became law 45 days later when the General Assembly declined to make changes. Fourteen plaintiffs challenged the plan, claiming, among other things, that minorities were insufficiently represented and that like communities had been split.

Michael S. Steele, chairman of the state Republican Party, said he was pleased by the new map, even though the court rejected his claim to elect all 141 delegates from individual districts rather than in groups of three as is most common.

"The party has an opportunity to be competitive where we haven't been competitive," he said.

One disappointment, Steele said, was that the judges left the district of Miller, the Senate president, relatively unscathed. Miller had complained to judges about an earlier redistricting ruling, sparking a controversy over whether the contact was appropriate.

"No, it didn't knock out Miller," Steele said.

Willis, the secretary of state, said Baltimore's new voter configuration could give rise to a legal challenge. "The Voting Rights Act protects all races," he said. "You may have white constituents who say their votes have been diluted."

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Under the court's plan, five of Baltimore City's six districts will be majority black; the governor's plan included two majority white districts. The city's population is 65 percent black.

According to University of Maryland School of Law professor Sherrilyn Ifill, the U.S. Supreme Court has taken such claims seriously.

"Ironically, it's been amazingly effective," she said.

The legal morass encompassing the redistricting process has led Taylor, the House speaker, to ponder revisions before the next census.

"When something like this occurs, it signals either that the current system and process is out of sync," Taylor said, "or perhaps the law needs to be more specific."

Sun staff writers Gerald Shields and Jason Song contributed to this report.

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