

PA House Majority Policy Committee
Southwest Hearing on Legislative Redistricting

January 4, 2022

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Members of the House Majority Policy Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today, regarding my concerns over the proposed legislative redistricting map.

By way of introduction, I am a lifelong resident of Oakmont, a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University with a degree in economics and a master's in management, served a term as an elected school board member for Riverview School District (which serves Oakmont and Verona), and am a founding partner in a Pittsburgh-based private capital firm with an investment strategy in sustainable infrastructure.

My concerns chiefly relate to how the proposed redistricting would affect my hometown of Oakmont, however I believe that it is very possible to extrapolate a broader theme from the issues that I will raise and apply them to the process at large.

For context, Oakmont is currently part of the 33rd House District. Oakmont is a town of slightly less than 2 square miles, with a population of roughly 6,500. We are grouped with other boroughs and townships of roughly similar size and scale, lining the Allegheny River Valley in the northeastern corner of Allegheny County, and including several communities in the northwestern most edge of Westmoreland County. These communities have a common history, having grown up in the expansion of industry in the Alle-Kiski valley over the last hundred and fifty years.

We share many of the same challenges in terms of growth and population trends. We have common economic concerns and closer cultural ties due to the nature of our situation along the river. We are part of the same transit corridor into Pittsburgh. Our towns have small, independent school districts with many similar issues.

With the exception of New Kensington, our communities are largely suburban in nature, small business districts surrounded by residential neighborhoods, edged by the beginnings of more rural ex urbs.

In sum, the ongoing concerns of Oakmont and her sister communities lining the Allegheny River are similar enough, our history and cultural and economic ties shared enough, and our scale related enough to warrant being joined together in one legislative district, that our state representative in Harrisburg is able to effectively represent our concerns and issues, and advocate for our voices effectively in the Legislature.

The newly proposed redistricting map would, inexplicably, move Oakmont to join Verona and part of Plum into the 32nd house district, which is dominated overwhelmingly by Penn Hills. Penn Hills, with an area of over 19 square miles, and with a population of over 42,000 people, is the second largest municipality in Allegheny County by population, after the City of Pittsburgh, and one of the top fifteen largest in the Commonwealth. While Penn Hills does geographically abut the Allegheny River, no part of that community is materially along the riverbanks, and the center of gravity of the city is significantly south and west of the river.

The economic and cultural ties between Penn Hills and Oakmont (or Verona, for that matter) are weak at best, and the scale of these respective communities are dramatically different. It is unrealistic to expect that a state representative might be able to effectively tend to the needs of communities that are among both the largest and smallest in the county, and who's history and future trajectory are not closely related.

It is not obvious to me what benefit the proposed map offers by joining Oakmont with Penn Hills in the 32nd House District. It seems to me that the best we could hope for is to be the forgotten community on the edge of a district, whose chief concerns are largely unrelated to those of our own.

I would propose instead that the borders of the 33rd House District as they have existed most recently be maintained - and should any changes be made that those changes be in the inclusion of other, similarly small river communities such as Verona or Blawnox. It is in our best interests, economically and culturally, to be joined with our sister communities in size and scale, in one district which can best represent us and our needs.

If any broader lesson can be drawn from this I would propose it is as follows: a district with somewhat haphazard borders is not automatically gerrymandered for political advantage - it is possible that the realities of geography, history, and economic and cultural ties lend themselves to a district which is not compact in shape, but is unified in spirit and purpose. A district with borders that *are* geometrically even is not immune from being drawn for political advantage, and does not automatically endow equal benefits to all residents of such a proposed district.

I strongly encourage the Legislature, and the Legislative Redistricting Commission, to reconsider their proposal to move Oakmont out of the 33rd House District, and rather to keep us grouped with those other small river towns with which we are most similar. I would likewise strongly encourage the drawing of a map which more closely considers the importance of historical, cultural, and economic ties of communities across Pennsylvania, which the current proposed map, by my reckoning, manifestly does not.

Thank you.