



10-23-2008

Technical Bulletins: Census Figures Help Cities Redistrict (2008)

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Recommended Citation

Jaeckel, Gary, "Technical Bulletins: Census Figures Help Cities Redistrict (2008)" (2008). *MTAS Publications: Technical Bulletins*.
https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_mtastech/69

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October 23, 2008

CENSUS FIGURES HELP CITIES REDISTRICT

Updated by Gary Jaeckel, Municipal Management Consultant

Creating voting districts or changing existing voting district lines (redistricting) ensures substantially equal populations in a city's voting districts or wards. This process usually takes place soon after each 10-year federal census. Municipalities and other political entities can use the federal population and statistical data to develop voting districts.

Federal and state constitutions and laws mandate redistricting at various government levels. Over the years, state and U.S. courts have refined and interpreted these requirements. The legal rulings may subject many Tennessee municipalities to redistricting.

Obviously, you must redistrict if your city elects or nominates any governing body member from districts and your private act or home rule charter requires redistricting after each census. Even if your charter doesn't require it, you should redistrict if your city elects or nominates any governing body member from currently established districts. Also, you may use the federal census data to create districts to replace at-large elections.

Although simple in concept, redistricting can be difficult in reality because of political and technical considerations. While Tennessee statutes do not require redistricting for

municipalities, the process should resemble the methods used by the state's General Assembly and county governments. Voting districts should be contiguous and substantially equal in population, and minority voting groups should have adequate representation on city boards and political bodies.

Federal case law and court decisions have successfully challenged at-large and multi-member voting districts. While such voting plans are not unconstitutional per se, courts historically have carefully examined them for evidence of denying minority populations the opportunity to elect candidates of their choice.

At-large elections are prevalent in this state. MTAS anticipates that some Tennessee municipalities will soon be forced to establish single-member voting districts. This may become more common as a result of the intense scrutiny of the 2000 presidential election process and the nationwide problems that surfaced.

Fortunately, there is help for municipalities that want to redistrict. The state comptroller's Office of Local Government has computer equipment and software that accesses detailed Census Bureau data

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for creating maps and drawing district and voting precinct lines. The program helps the Tennessee General Assembly draw new state representative and senatorial districts. The census data will be available to the University of Tennessee's County Technical Assistance Service (CTAS) and other state agencies that will help counties develop redistricting plans mandated by state statute. MTAS asked that cities have access to this information, and it is now available to help cities that need assistance forming a redistricting plan.

The Office of Local Government has developed a basic "how-to" redistricting

manual that covers redistricting law and census terminology. Although the manual was not written specifically for municipalities, they will find much of the information useful.

For more details, call the Office of Local Government at (615) 741-7721. The address is

James K. Polk Building, Suite 1400
 505 Deaderick St.
 Nashville, TN 37243-0276

For further information or assistance on redistricting, contact your MTAS municipal management consultant.

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