

## **REDISTRICTING AND FAIR REPRESENTATION**

### **IN MOORE COUNTY**

#### **A BRIEF HISTORY**

**Barbara Farr**

Redistricting of unevenly populated electoral units and fair representation of voters at the polls have been the focus of the League of Women Voters of Moore County since its founding in 1985.

The League's first efforts began after the results of the 1990 Census were available. At that time, Moore County's population numbered 59,000, and the county was divided into two Congressional districts—the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 8<sup>th</sup>. In January, 1992, the League expressed concern regarding the State Assembly's discussion of district plans.

Collaborating with the Moore County Republican Women's Party and the Democratic Women's Party, the League drafted a letter to the County's legislators in the General Assembly stating that "Moore County would be best served if united in a single congressional district." Recommending an open process for redistricting, the letter emphasized that "it should be possible for political forces to compete in an open environment in which participants and observers can watch and understand the decisions being made." Furthermore, the process should be non-partisan in fairness to all.

Our State League President at the time supported the issue. She stated in a letter to *The Pilot*: "apportionment and redistricting for representation should be based on population data and good government principles and done in an orderly, equitable non-partisan manner." Unfortunately, it wasn't. Eventually, all of Moore County was placed in Congressional District 6 on December 5, 2001 (Session Law 2001-479).

Many Moore County residents in the mostly rural northern areas became concerned about population growth in the southern urbanized part beginning in the early 1990s and how it affected their representation in county government. They began to question the fairness of how the commissioners were elected. Moore County is a residency, not a representative district. Voters elect the nominees at large. A candidate for the County Board of Commissioners must reside in a specific electoral district, but he/she does not represent that district only but the whole county. This was established for all counties by the North Carolina General Assembly in 1965.

Among the five County Commissioner districts, one commissioner resided in the northern district as required. Although the voters elected members at large, this commissioner was representative of far fewer citizens in his/her district than the districts that encompassed the towns of Southern Pines, Pinehurst and Aberdeen. Most importantly, in case of a primary contest, the northern district voters would not have as much control over the selection as the voters in the rest of the county. In fact, a highly populated southern county district could by sheer numbers select the primary candidate in the northern district.

This became an issue in 1995. The League entered the discussion and sponsored several informative community meetings at the Sandhills Community College in January, 1995.

Speakers presented the pros and cons of changing the electoral process from residential to representative. There was little support for recommending the process change. However, the awareness of voters who attended these meetings and subsequent League publicity may have inspired the County Commissioners to acknowledge the population inequality of the districts. Ideally, the variance of population among districts should be no more than 5%. The Commissioners requested and the General Assembly approved SENATE BILL 717, AN ACT TO REQUIRE THE MOORE COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS TO REDISTRICT THEIR RESIDENCY DISTRICTS. It was ratified on June 12, 1995.

Temporarily, the issue of fair representation was resolved. However, the county's population continued to grow unevenly and the county lacked jurisdiction over the kinds of development that could be established. In 1996 an industrial hog farm corporation proposed the establishment of a large facility in the northern area that could have had a negative impact on the rural environment. Only by grassroots involvement, including a four member educational forum held by the Moore County League, did the hog farm abandon its plan.

No zoning existed outside of municipalities except for state mandated watershed protection and regulation of manufactured homes and subdivisions. To address this problem the County established a Land Use Plan Steering Committee in early 1998 composed of 21 leading members from various groups, organizations, including the League of Women Voters, and residential areas. The Committee's mission: explore "the development of a Land Use Plan for the unincorporated area of Moore County lying outside of municipal extraterritorial planning areas."

The Land Use Plan was developed by holding public information sessions throughout the county. Although many people supported the idea, there was much resistance. Land use meant "zoning" and zoning implied taking away the people's rights to do what they wanted with their property. However, the general public was persuaded that there was a need for land use planning in order to maintain the rural environment. The Plan was adopted by the County Commissioners on March 15, 1999. Furthermore, a Land Use Plan enhanced the electoral power of the northern area by controlling undesirable development such as noisy woodchip mills or inappropriate dumping of refuse.

The population of Moore County continued to grow. According to the 2000 Census Moore County contained 74,769 residents. By mid-decade the estimated population had risen to 83,000. The 2010 Census identified a population of 88,247—a whopping increase of 18% over ten years. Most of these newcomers resided in the southern towns and villages. It became evident to the Moore County League that inequities existed among the five Commissioners' districts that were similar, or greater than, those in 1995.

The Moore County League established a committee in 2005 to investigate, evaluate and recommend further action for Fair Representation and Redistricting of the Commissioners and Board of Education districts which are contiguous. After extensive research and consultation with relevant staff in our state government, the committee presented a PowerPoint factual analysis to the County Commissioners in 2008 that suggested the redrawing of district lines. Although seemingly receptive, the Commissioners recommended delaying any action until the results of the 2010 Census were available.

The general topic of redistricting became an issue in the state of North Carolina and one that the state League adopted. In order to encourage local Leagues to be involved in the subject, the state League offered several grants of \$1000 for proposals from local Leagues that best presented plans of action. The League of Women Voters of Moore County was awarded a grant on March 21, 2011. This enabled the Moore County League to prepare materials, PowerPoint presentations and create a plan of action.

The research, methods and recommendations of the Moore County League's "Redistricting and Fair Representation" project were presented to the biennial Convention of the League of Women Voters of North Carolina on May 21 in Raleigh. Chairperson Carolyn Mealing and Committee Member, Barbara Farr, conducted two sessions that were well received by convention attendees who were planning similar actions in their local Leagues.

Utilizing Census 2010 data and map preparation by the Moore County GIS (Geospatial Information Services, a computer system used to describe a place of location in the county), the Committee again presented a PowerPoint analysis to the Commissioners on May 21, 2011, and suggested action. This was not immediately forthcoming, but a special meeting of interested parties was called by the Commissioners on September 22 to discuss the issue. A number of district options were presented by the GIS specialist that would ensure no Commissioner or Board of Education member would be competing with one another in the newly drawn districts. There was a general consensus among attendees that Option 6 was preferred.

Still the issue was not resolved. League members continued to attend Commissioners' meetings to support their request for Redistricting. On January 3, 2012, League President Jo Nicholas gave an impassioned commentary and plea for the Commissioners to vote on the issue. And they did. The Commissioners voted to adopt Option 6 of the Redistricting map. There still remained the passing of a Resolution for implementation.

The Moore County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously on January 17, 2012, to approve a legal Resolution of the Redistricting plan as presented. This was the final acknowledgement by this governing body that proposals by the League of Women Voters of Moore County indeed had merit. It remained for the Commissioners to direct the appropriate departments to implement the plan.

The League of Women Voters of Moore County can be proud of the Redistricting and Fair Representation Committee members, Linda Tableman, O'Linda Gillis, Jean Burbage, Barbara Farr and, especially, the chair, Carolyn Mealing. Another success for the League!