

Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify here today. My name is Cynthia Blake. I have been a candidate for at-large council, and I am actively involved in organizations throughout the community, such as Council of Negro Women, Akron Pee Wee Executive Committee, special interest for Autism Policies, Political Analysts and Board member of Pride thru Empowerment. I am here today to urge you to give a voice to Summit County's African American population by drawing compact districts in the city of Akron that allow the election of minority candidates to office, and which follow all applicable laws, such as the federal Voting Rights Act.

For all the focus on gerrymandering at the state and federal level, it is extremely disappointing to me that our local newspapers and so-called non-partisan organizations like the League of Women Voters refuse to even acknowledge that our current county council map may well violate the bedrock piece of civil rights legislation, the Voting Rights Act. In the nearly decade that this map has been in place, the Akron Beacon Journal has never once asked why there is not a majority minority district for county council, despite the requirement to create one. The fact that an African American leader has been able to get elected to a single county council seat does not change the fact that a Voting Rights Act compliant majority-minority district does not exist, despite the legal requirement to do so. The current county council cracks apart the city of Akron and Summit County's African American population, primarily for the benefit of white male elected officials who live in the suburban cities.

The current map does not appear to include a single majority-minority district, despite the requirement to draw majority-minority districts in the VRA. Using 2018 data, and a program called Districts, I've included as an exhibit to my testimony an example of what a majority-minority district looks like, which shows that it can be done. Given the data available, a majority minority district would likely need to stay entirely within the city of Akron, which none of the districts do under the existing plan.

Despite making up 33% of the city of Akron's population, African American voters in Summit County are only able to elect a minority representative to one of the six districts touching parts of the city because of the way in which the city, and the minority population, is being cracked apart. What do voters in Akron's 5<sup>th</sup> Ward have in common with voters in Bath? Minority communities of interest are being ripped apart, which prevents their voice from being heard and their issues being focused on.

In the past month, Summit County politicians have been very vocal about the redistricting efforts going on in Columbus. In fact, we have a county councilmember who serves as the chairwoman of the Ohio Democratic Party, along with both Minority Leader Emilia Sykes and Sen. Vernon Sykes, all of these officials are from Summit County. All of these leaders have been very forceful talking about the need to use African-American Census data to maximize the opportunities for minority candidates to get elected. It would be extremely hypocritical for the body, on which the head of the ODP serves, to turn around and enact a county council map that ignores those opportunities here in Summit County.

In order to fix the current map, I would like to propose a number of considerations for this body:

1. Follow the Voting Rights Act: a majority-minority district is possible in Summit County. Given the evidence of racially polarized voting in Summit County over the past decade, such as the primary for District 7 in 2016, a failure to draw a majority-minority district in the county would likely lead

to a lawsuit. Voters in the county would be better served by simply following the law from the beginning.

2. Publish the data: When the maps are drawn, this commission should publish the data to show critical pieces of information, such as African American population by district, including the GIS shape files. The advent of powerful computer programs for redistricting makes this extremely easy. Publicizing this data will show that the commission is being transparent in their attempts to follow the law and give voters confidence in this map.
3. Protect communities of interest: For all the criticism of the redistricting efforts in Columbus, the Ohio Constitution provides strong rules that require that when a county has multiple ratios of representation, districts must be drawn entirely within that county, and that the remainder portion can only be attached to one other district. In Summit County, with 544,795 residents under the 2020 Census, that means that the average county council district size is 68,099. If Summit County had the same protections as the Ohio Constitution, the city of Akron would have 2 full county council districts entirely within the city limits. Drawing districts entirely within the city of Akron would maximize the ability of African American voters to elect representatives of their community to the council. It is no surprise that there has never been an African American elected to countywide office on a partisan ticket in Summit County in at least 40 years, if ever. Cracking apart the African American community, as the current map does, prevents the community from electing multiple leaders to represent their interests, and in doing so, prevents them from building a bench of multiple candidates that could move on to a countywide position. As part of the map I've submitted using 2018 data, if a second district was drawn entirely inside the city of Akron, this district, while falling short of majority-majority status, would still likely elect an African American leader to the county council seat. The data does not appear to have changed so fundamentally from 2018 that this is still not possible to do.

I strongly encourage the county council redistricting commission to, at bare minimum, make sure to follow these first two principles. Failing to do so would make the criticism of Summit County leaders about the state and federal redistricting process ring hollow. They would be advocating for principles in Columbus and DC and failing to protect them in their own backyards. Not only would this make Summit County voters deeply cynical about the partisan games being played by their county leadership, it would likely result in litigation that would only deepen voter distrust in county government. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the commission.

Here is the link to the map:  
<https://districtr.org/COI/49187>

Data from Districtr.org

**Community 1 (blue)**

Total population: 67,586

White population: 42.8%

Black population: 50.2%

2+: 2.7%

Hispanic: 2%

Asian: 2%

Native: 0.2%

Other: 0.2%  
NH/PI: 0%

**Community 2: (yellow)**

Total population: 67,958  
White population: 56%  
Black population: 34%  
2+: 3.8%  
Hispanic: 3%  
Asian: 2.7%  
Native: 0.2%  
Other: 0.3%  
NH/PI: 0%Exhibit:

Respectfully Submitted by:

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