

Mr. Chairman, members of the Redistricting Commission, thank you for allowing me to speak before the panel once again. My name is Cynthia Blake. I am here a second time to express my disappointment with the proposed map that has been produced here today. Once again, the city of Akron, a city I care deeply about, has been split into six separate pieces, and more importantly, the voice of African American voters in the city has been diluted for the benefit of white elected officials and candidates.

More importantly, I feel that this map violates important considerations of the Voting Rights Act. By the commission's own data, no district in the proposed map contains more than 39% African American population. This is despite the ability to draw a majority minority district, as a previous map I submitted shows. Just as disappointingly, it is clear that this process, which voters implemented to create a voice independent of the elected officials on county official, has been infected with partisan intent to create these gerrymandered lines.

I believe that the inability to draw a true majority minority district in the city of Akron violates the Voting Rights Act. I know that many people will brag about this map creating two districts of over 30% African American population. But, this is a misguided effort to whitewash, in multiple senses of the word, the cracking of minority communities for the political benefit of white elected officials and candidates. The point of the VRA is to draw majority minority with sufficient minority voting strength to elect candidates from those communities. This map fails this challenge in multiple areas.

It is worth noting, at this point, the huge disservice that is done to black community in Akron by the so-called paper of record, the Akron Beacon Journal. It took an article in the Reporter Newspaper, the gatekeepers to informing the black community about what is really going on in the community, for the ABJ to begin reporting on the need for more minority representation on County Council. Even when they finally got around to reporting on it, it is important to note that they changed an earlier version of the story that claimed that this map did a better job of keeping communities that were similar to each other in similar districts. It is no surprise that they would want to change this after the article was published. I said in my first testimony, what does the Ward 5 Akron city council area have anything to do with Bath township? All this map does is change that comment from Ward 5 to Wards 3 and 4. What do these areas have in common? NOTHING! Where was the ABJ for the past decade, when it came to reporting on the dilution of the power of African American voters. I am sad that the ABJ only seems to cast a critical eye on gerrymandered maps when it comes to the state and federal lines. When it comes to protecting minority voters at the local level, the newspaper does not seem to care.

For example, as I have previously indicated, there is the ability to draw a true majority minority district of just over 50% African American population, and still draw a district with over 30% African American population. I had spoken with one of the consultants this commission had hired during a previous meeting of this commission, and I was told that they would at least attempt to draw a 50% African American district, to see if it was possible. This has not happened. I think that this commission is well aware of the legal protections afforded to districts with 50% minority population once they are drawn, and the requirements to protect those districts under the VRA. It seems clear that this commission's attempts to avoid drawing a 50% black district is to avoid being bound by the VRA to keep that district in place in the future.

Furthermore, the purpose of the VRA is to allow minority candidates to have sufficient strength to elect candidates that reflect their communities. Even under the proposed map, one of the two districts with over 30% black population would still be represented by a white man. This is important because of the

demonstrated historical legacy of racialized voting patterns in primaries for Summit County Council, such as the primary for District 7 in 2016. Given this history of racialized voting for Summit County Council, where we have the data showing this problem, how can minority voters be sure that minority candidates challenging white incumbents in primaries will be able to get their preferred candidate elected when the percentage of African American population is below 50%?

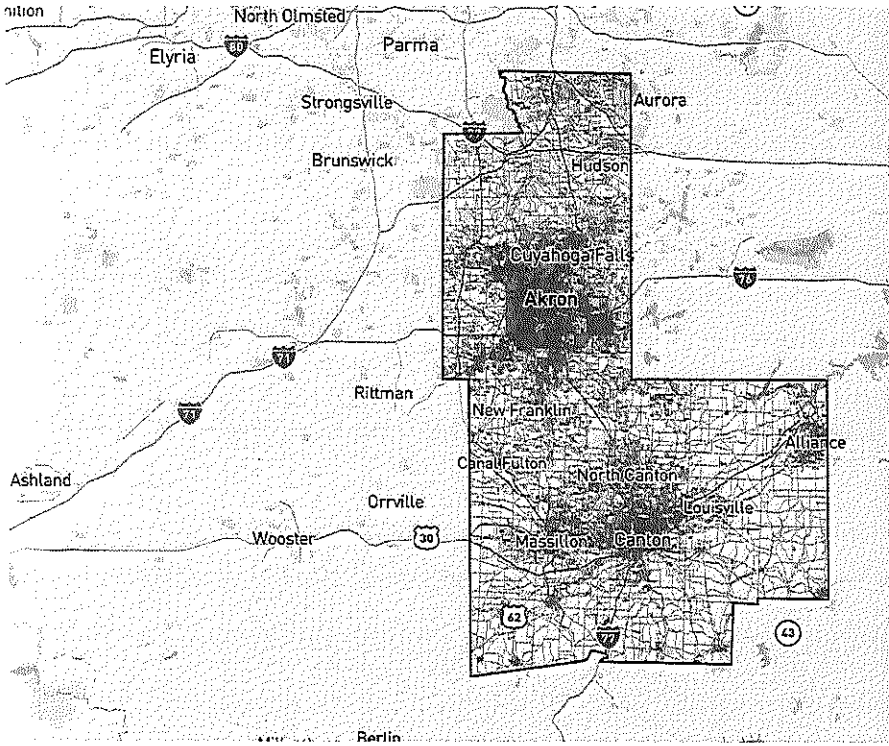
If districts with less than 40% black population are suddenly acceptable for districts under the VRA, then why has the commission chosen to stop at two districts? As part of my testimony today, I am including a link to a map, using the Districtr program, that creates three districts of approximately 32% African American population. I believe that the requirements of the Voting Rights Act require drawing a true majority minority district, which is what I continue to fight for. But, the point of this map that I am including today is to highlight that the map under consideration tonight by the commission still suffers from the same fatal flaw as the current one; minority communities in the city of Akron are being cracked apart and their votes diluted in order to benefit individuals from the suburbs. The proposed map is NOT about improving African American representation on this body. If less than 50% black population is ok under the VRA, adopt my map for the city of Akron and create three of those districts, so that the black population of this county can develop a bench of candidates to eventually run for county executive or prosecuting attorney or some other partisan countywide position, where they have never held office before. If, by the commission's own standard, districts with less than 40% African American population are ok, than a failure to draw three of these districts could run afoul of the county charter's own requirement to broaden the opportunities for historically underrepresented and minority communities to elect representatives to the council. This would present an opportunity to legally challenge this map in state courts, along with a challenge in federal courts under the Voting Rights Act.

Finally, I must conclude by saying that I am frustrated, because I had hoped that this independent commission process would actually be independent. I understand why county council members, like the head of the Ohio Democratic Party, Councilwoman Liz Walters, would want this map. In 2015, Summit County voters effectively rejected splitting the city of Akron into six pieces when they voted for the creation of an independent redistricting process, and taking it out of the hands of politicians. If voters were happy with the old map, why would they support amending the charter? Yet this commission is on the verge of not only maintaining what voters rejected, but continuing to undermine the goals of the Voting Rights Act and the provisions of the charter amendment. The commission has not produced any public document giving insight into why they think that this map legally complies with the VRA. At previous meetings of the commission, a legal opinion of this sort had been discussed. Unfortunately, it now seems like we are headed to a place where it will take a legal challenge in the courts and a judicial ruling to decide whether the county is compliant with the Voting Rights Act. So, I will end my testimony by asking the members of this commission a few final questions: are you willing to risk your reputations for this map in a court of law? Where is any sort of nonpartisan legal analysis of this map as it relates to compliance with the Voting Rights Act? Why haven't you tried to at least propose a district that is 50.1% black, like we discussed in previous meetings? I truly do not believe that anyone on this panel has any interest in violating civil rights, but I am afraid that is the risk you run by passing this map. I ask that you reject this map and draw one that is truly reflective our community.

Link to map:

<https://districtr.org/COI/63367>

Synthia D. Blair 10/19/21



Drawing

Data Layers

Evaluation

▼ Areas of Interest

SELECT

Community 1

NAME

Community 1

Describe this community

These details are updated automatically

▼ Important Places

