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Albany County Legislature Creates Commission on Redistricting Local Law O is Adopted in 28-9 vote

Albany, NY – The Albany County Legislature has created a Commission on Redistricting to facilitate a non-partisan, independent, inclusive and participatory redistricting process.

Legislators voted Monday to adopt Local Law O, amending Section 207 of the Albany County Charter, relating to commissions on redistricting to create a non-partisan process for determining the County’s legislative districts following the next federal Census in 2020.

The County’s legislative districts must be adjusted in accordance with the relative population growth and shifts as indicated in the Census to ensure that fair representation for each resident is maintained.

“Congratulations to the sponsors of Local Law O, specifically Legislators Joanne Cunningham, Wanda Willingham and Peter Crouse, for taking a bipartisan approach in creating the most independent and inclusive redistricting process Albany County has ever seen,” Legislature Chair Andrew Joyce stated. “Thank you to the legislators who fully supported this bill through all of its revisions and the countless meetings held to discuss the process. While some may not agree, this bill is the best assurance we have not to repeat the mistakes of the past and ensure that all County residents are represented.”

According to the Local Law, the Commission, which will consist of nine members who are County residents, will be transparent, accountable and function independently, without the influence of sitting elected officials and their representatives. The Commission’s work will be done through a “professional process that includes experts in the areas of redistricting, law, county geography and other important elements that are key to securing a credible, responsive and accountable redistricting process and outcome,” according to the bill.

“This charter amendment will change Albany County’s redistricting process to make it an accountable, transparent and public process to redraw district lines. The lawsuits of the past will end with this public and open process that delinks the politics from redistricting,” Legislator Joanne Cunningham, sponsor of Local Law O, said. “We worked for three years to get here and this is a consensus product, with bipartisan co-sponsorship and an inclusive and open drafting process that allowed for maximum public and lawmaker input.”

“Local Law O represents the culmination of numerous issues that were debated during negotiations as all members involved attempted to achieve a consensus to ensure, as much as possible, an independent redistricting commission that will produce an equitable redistricting of the County’s legislative districts.” Legislator and sponsor Peter Crouse stated.

A special Majority Minority District Reapportionment Subcommittee, consisting of seven members, will also be created to assist the Commission to ensure the fair representation of Albany County minority communities in all aspects of the redistricting process. The subcommittee will make recommendations to the Commission regarding the configuration of the minority districts, with the goal of protecting voting rights of minority residents and ensuring adequate electoral representation of minority residents residing in those districts.

“It is not a secret that Albany County has been involved in multiple lawsuits over the years regarding its redistricting process, the most recent of which was in 2015. That is why this bill is so important. It establishes a completely new process when it comes to redistricting so we can avoid future lawsuits,” Deputy Chair and co-sponsor Wanda Willingham said. “This bill ensures transparency and offers all people an opportunity to be treated fairly, which was our main goal when we started this process. I am proud of the final product that we adopted tonight.”

The Legislature is hoping the new commission will help to avoid a repeat of 2015 when a federal judge ruled that the County redistricting map of 2011 violated the federal Voting Rights Act by diluting minority voting power. Senior U.S. Judge Lawrence Kahn gave the county three weeks to draft an additional district in which minority voters are a majority. The ruling gave the County a fifth majority-minority district.

“This vote comes after a long, collaborative effort by the sponsors regarding the redistricting process in Albany County.” said Majority Leader Dennis Feeney. “I commend the hard work and perseverance demonstrated by each of them to put forward a bill that we could get behind.”

“The League will always want perfection – the best possible solution for the citizens of Albany County. But we also recognize that perfection isn’t always obtainable,” stated Patricia Sibilgia, President of League of Women Voters of Albany County. “Local Law O has a lot of the key tenets of good redistricting practices: it attempts to filter out candidates who may want to unfairly influence the maps; it calls for diversity amongst the Commissioners; it includes transparency in the process and it addresses the basic criteria in drawing equitable district maps. However, it has some draw backs to it. We were asking to have political data completely removed from the process, and the choosing of Commissioners require a unanimous vote by those appointed. Regardless, we all should take a moment now to recognize this accomplishment of being able to present legislation that could majorly improve what has been a very broken process in our County.”