



Redistricting Commission Approves New Michigan Maps, Splitting GT County; Local Leaders React

By Beth Milligan

Michigan's Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission (MICRC) approved new political maps Tuesday that will set the lines for the state's 13 congressional districts, 38 state Senate seats, and 110 state House seats for the next decade. Most impactfully to northwest Michigan, Grand Traverse County – which was previously unified under one House district, District 104 – is now split into two districts. District 103 will include the northern parts of Grand Traverse and Benzie counties and all of Leelanau County, while District 104 will include the southern parts of Grand Traverse and Benzie counties, Antrim County, and parts of Kalkaska, Wexford, and Manistee counties. Assuming the new boundaries withstand expected legal challenges, the changes will have significant impacts on the 2022 election, including potentially requiring current District 104 Rep. John Roth to move if he and Rep. Jack O'Malley both seek reelection.

After months of public meetings, discussion, and review of map drafts submitted by both the public and commission members, the 13-member MICRC approved three final political maps this week. Eleven members supported the “Hickory” House map, nine members supported the “Linden” Senate map, and eight members supported the “Chestnut” congressional map. Each map required support from at least two Democrats, two Republicans, and two Independents on the commission to be adopted. The vote marked a historic milestone, with a citizen-led commission choosing political lines for the first time instead of state legislators. Sixty-one percent of Michigan voters in 2018 approved changing the redistricting process to address the practice of gerrymandering, or

drawing lines for partisan advantage. An independent nonpartisan report in 2018 found that Michigan district maps were among some of the most skewed in the country, [giving Republicans a disproportionate majority at the state and federal levels](#).

The MICRC had to follow several rules when drawing new districts. Districts needed to be “of equal population as mandated by the United States constitution” and “comply with the voting rights act and other federal laws.” They also needed to be “geographically contiguous,” “reflect the state's diverse population and communities of interest,” not “provide a disproportionate advantage to any political party,” “not favor or disfavor an incumbent elected official or a candidate,” “reflect consideration of county, city, and township boundaries,” and be “reasonably compact.” Early draft maps showed Grand Traverse County split into as many three districts, [drawing concerns from county commissioners of both political parties this fall](#) about losing unified representation under one House representative in Lansing.

While those three-district maps ultimately didn't come to pass, Grand Traverse County will still be split into two districts under the new approved lines. The move reconfigures and recombines parts of the districts currently served by Roth and O'Malley, who must now decide whether to challenge each other in 2022 or amicably take on different districts. Roth says he is “definitely eyeing” the latter scenario, an outcome O'Malley agrees is likely. In that case, Roth would run for the new District 104 – the southeastern of the two districts – and let O'Malley run for the new District 103 to the northwest. If both representatives win those seats, that would mean a majority of Grand Traverse County residents would have O'Malley instead of Roth as their representative going forward. Roth, meanwhile, would serve southern Grand Traverse County and gain an entirely new constituency in several counties to the south and east.

That scenario would also require Roth to move or establish a new residency. While congressional representatives don't have to live in the districts they serve, state legislators in Michigan do. “The southern district is a half mile from my house,” Roth says. “I don't suspect I'd run against Jack, so if I want to continue to run and not take time off, I'd be eyeing that southern seat.” Noting that he already represents part of the new District 104 and lives nearby, Roth says: “It's not like I'd be a carpet bagger or moving into an area I don't represent.”

Having a new district in an election year, however, does pose a unique challenge for incumbents used to relying on name recognition with voters, Roth acknowledges. “It's going to be an interesting, it's going to be a task,” he says. “Before I just knocked on every door in Grand Traverse County. Now you'll have to find those lines and know who you do and don't represent.” Roth says his biggest concern is confusion among voters about what districts they belong to and who represents them in the next election. “There are going to be mailers that go to the wrong district, it's going to be confusing for a while,” he says. “The (MICRC) did what they thought was right, but the constituents are going to have to do their homework and figure out who represents them. The first few years will be tough.”

For his part, O'Malley says he's lived in the area for almost 40 years and was active in Traverse City media for 34 years, so he's not worried about name recognition locally in a reconfigured district. "It's not as if I'm a stranger," he says. O'Malley confirms he'll definitely seek reelection in 2022 and anticipates knowing as soon as next week which district he will seek to represent. "In this era of term limits, the experience I have is invaluable," he says. "My two terms give me a ton of experience, and that's important to the region. We need that experience in Lansing."

Grand Traverse County won't face nearly as much disruption on the state Senate or congressional district level as the House shakeup. The county will still be in Michigan Senate District 37 – currently represented by State Senator Wayne Schmidt, who is term-limited out at the end of this year – and follows similar boundaries as before, though part of the eastern Upper Peninsula has been moved over to District 38. Congressional District 1 – covering all of the Upper Peninsula and most of northern lower Michigan, including Grand Traverse County – has been slightly reshaped around its southwestern boundary, but otherwise has similar lines as before. That district is represented by Rep. Jack Bergman.

Having two voices instead of one in Lansing on the state House level could be beneficial for Grand Traverse County, Schmidt says, though he also notes that political differences at the local level – such as differing priorities between Leelanau and Grand Traverse counties – could occasionally pose challenges. He predicts that political candidates moving to be eligible for certain districts, a common practice in southern Michigan that Roth is now considering, will become less unusual in northern Michigan going forward. Schmidt also believes his successor, whoever that might be, and other future District 37 state senators – who have often hailed from the Traverse City region – could be spread out more geographically going forward. "That'll be an adjustment for many groups, regardless of where they sit on the political spectrum," he says.

Several Grand Traverse County commissioners say they're disappointed to see the county splintered under House representation, but will do their best to work with both representatives of the new Districts 103 and 104 to advocate for county interests. "It seems like Grand Traverse County is an area of common interest as a political area...so I think it's a mistake to break up the county," says Commissioner Darryl Nelson. "It's more difficult when you have two different representatives." However, Nelson says he has a good working relationship with both Roth and O'Malley. "Personally, I think we'll be able to work well together," he says. Though County Commissioner Betsy Coffia also opposed the divide, she says that given the county's population size "it's inevitable we'd end up getting split up. I sort of resigned myself to that, because we're growing and our population is getting larger." Coffia says she has advocated for setting aside time on a quarterly basis for state representatives to meet with commissioners and would "want to expand that and have both representatives there" in the future.

Chair Rob Hentschel, meanwhile, points out that lawsuits are expected to be filed challenging the MICRC's maps, comments echoed by Roth and Schmidt. Detroit Democrats have expressed unhappiness with the way some southeastern districts were redrawn, while the Michigan Republican Party issued a statement saying it was "evaluating all options to take steps necessary to defend the voices silenced by this commission." Hentschel calls the redistricting process an "idealistic great idea that I think in practice didn't pan out the way anyone thought it would, because neither Democrats nor Republicans are happy with it. The old way wasn't perfect, but it was better

than this.” Voters Not Politicians, the group that led the effort for an independent redistricting commission, [praised the end result](#), however, saying it showed that “Michiganders can come together across party lines to defend democracy — an important lesson for our nation and a reason to celebrate,” according to Executive Director Nancy Wang.

Pictured: Left, the new House district map for northern Michigan, and right, the current House district map for northern Michigan. In the new map, District 103 (the northern parts of Grand Traverse and Benzie counties and all of Leelanau County) is shown in purple, while District 104 (the southern parts of Grand Traverse and Benzie counties, Antrim County, and parts of Kalkaska, Wexford, and Manistee counties) is shown in blue-green.