Rules of Redistricting: Communities of Interest

What is a Community of Interest?

A community of interest is a neighborhood, community, or group of people who have common policy concerns and would benefit from being maintained in a single district. Another way of understanding a community of interest is that it is simply a way for a community to tell its own story about what neighbors share in common, and what makes it unique when compared to surrounding communities. They are defined by the <u>local</u> community members.

Why is a community of interest important?

Keeping communities of interest together is an important principle in redistricting. It can be especially helpful to communities that have been traditionally left out of the political process. Community members can define their communities by telling their own stories and describe their concerns to policy makers. Without this, those who may not have their best interest in mind will define the communities for them.

What are examples of a community of interest?

A community of interest can be defined in many ways. Race and ethnicity can play a role in defining a community of interest but cannot be used as the sole definition. Residents may have a shared ancestry, history, or language.

Here are a few examples:

- **Residents** who have been working together to advocate for keeping a local health clinic open
- **Community members in an area** who formed around getting assistance to repair their neighborhood after a natural disaster
- **A neighborhood** organizing to have a high school built closer to their area
- **A community** that advocates for having a special recognition for cultural holidays, like Lunar New Year
- **Neighbors** who are advocating for the closure of a nearby coal plant

How can I define a community of interest?

Communities of interest are self-defined and create a common story. They can be described by creating maps and narrative profiles and providing community stories. The strongest arguments contain both qualitative (stories) and quantitative (data or statistics) information. While there are no clear rules on how to define a community of interest, the following are the basic elements.

- **Personal Testimonies** – Personal stories are powerful. Find community members willing to share examples of things residents share in common and what makes your community unique. Imagine describing your community to a visitor from out of town. Does your neighborhood share certain celebrations or traditions, like street festivals or parades? Are there important places where your community gathers, like parks or community centers? What is the history of how your community came together?

- **Written description** – A written description can be used to tell a community's story. Describe what connects the people and why it's important that they be kept together. Whenever possible include statistics to support your testimonies, including data on education levels, graduation rates, median household income, poverty levels, access to technology, homeownership rates, language isolation, voter registration rates, etc. This information can be gathered from the U.S. Census Bureau, universities, local government reports, etc. Consider using reliable sources such as the Census Bureau to find data on income, education, language, race, ethnicity, and ancestry.

- **Community Issues** – Often communities get involved in redistricting because they feel their issues have not been adequately addressed by their elected representative. Highlighting community issues in personal stories and written narratives help demonstrate the importance of having elected officials who understand and respond to community needs. Has your community come together to advocate for important services, better schools, roads, or health centers in your neighborhood? Have you worked for more recognition or support of your community, like having holidays recognized or historical events commemorated?

- **Boundary maps** – Create a map of your neighborhood or area. Mark the street names and significant locations. They can include significant landmarks and gathering places, including social service agencies, community centers, shopping districts, schools, and religious places. It may be helpful to have or create a name for your community area to be a reminder about what makes your community unique. Use Google Maps or other mapping sites to create maps. Paper maps such as AAA road maps can also be helpful in drawing maps.

The information can be presented at public hearings or in meetings with legislators to advocate that a community be kept together. Building community profiles and testimonies can have benefits beyond the redistricting process. They can also be used for future policy advocacy and coalition building. Furthermore, having the information on public record can be a basis for lawsuits to challenge redistricting maps. (See **Getting Involved: Preparing Your Testimony**)