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Sent via email only

House and Senate Redistricting Committees
HouseSpecialCommitteeOnRedistricting@leg.state.nh.us
senate.redistricting@leg.state.nh.us

Dear Committee members:

I have been a resident of Unity since 1984 and worked with low income individuals and families in Sullivan County for over 30 years. I am also a new Board member of Granite State Interfaith Action Fund (GSIAF). GSIAF is a statewide, interfaith organization dedicated to increasing voter turnout in Low Income and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities and in ensuring that all have access to the ballot. GSIAF works to unite religious, labor and community organizations rooted in faith and democratic values; to strengthen their voices in decisions that shape New Hampshire communities; and to advocate for policies that will broaden and deepen the constituent organizations, build communities and promote a just society for the people of New Hampshire.

Fair redistricting maps need a transparent and inclusive process. A fair redistricting map responds to the will and needs of the people. When any one party controls the legislative and executive branches, the process of redistricting can lead to the results being subject to political partisanship and gerrymandering. It is disappointing that legislative efforts to create a better process were defeated. Improvements such as an advisory committee on redistricting, procedural rules to ensure bipartisanship or an independent redistricting committee would have improved the current redistricting process. There is a real danger that the current process will lead to citizens becoming cynical about how politicians work for their own narrow advantage. Please do not disappoint us and to the best of your ability make this a transparent, inclusive, and fair process with a just result.

Here are some specific recommendations about Sullivan County that relate to the concept of community of interest. This refers to whether voters joined together through redistricting have common interests. This includes do the residents live in primarily rural or urban communities and whether or not they share common interests such as: common schools and youth programs, where they work and shop, where they receive medical care, and share natural resources like common recreational areas and transportation systems.

Senate Districts: The residents of Sullivan County would be better served if all of Sullivan County was in one Senate District. We share common economic and social problems

better served by a Senator who represents only us or at least all of us. I live in Unity which is part of Senate District 8 which stretches down south to Weare. I am using Weare as an example because I know a little about Weare since my wife spent her later teen years growing up in North Weare and her parents still lived in Weare when we later started dating. Weare is a bedroom community to Manchester and further south and shares little or no community of interest with my town. I suspect few voters in Weare have any idea even where Unity is located. Their economic and social needs and the needs of many other municipalities in Senate District 8 are not the same as Unity or the other Sullivan County towns joined into Senate District 8.

House Districts: Unity is now part of the house district that includes Newport. The population of Newport and Sunapee are large enough to each have a house district. The little towns of Sullivan County like Unity would be better served by that change. Unity is a small population town with a relatively large geographic area. I live in West Unity and my economic and social interest are tied to Claremont. That is where we grocery shop, our family worked and my children went to school. When I first moved to Unity it was part of the house district that included Claremont and I felt better represented. However, many residents in Unity live in East Unity and are at least geographically closer to Newport so the shifting back and forth between Claremont and Newport may not serve their community of interest. There is no perfect solution to this problem but the smaller towns of Sullivan County in many ways share more in common with each other than they share with the larger municipalities. This also solves the problem of some residents in a town being part of a house district with a larger community where they share few common interests.

Executive Council: Sullivan County municipalities should be part of one Executive Council district with other municipalities in southwestern New Hampshire. The 2020 Map-a-Thon Executive Council map is not perfect but accounting for population requirements is fairer than the current District 2. Unity and other Sullivan County municipalities are part of District 2 which has been described as shaped liked a dragon across the state. Residents of Sullivan County do not share a community of interest with the municipalities on the seacoast. This is a clear example of excessive partisanship in redistricting. The map or shape of District 2 allowed the Republican party to aggregate many registered voters into one district. This is classic gerrymandering and Councilor Warmington is the only democratic party member in the Executive Council. That result leads to voters being cynical of the political process and of politicians in general.

In conclusion: Thank you for journeying to Sullivan County to hear our concerns. To complete your job, you need to return to Sullivan County after the proposed new maps have been created. True transparency and a fair and inclusive process requires that the public have the opportunity to review and comment on the proposed maps before redistricting is final.

Sincerely,

/s/ Ben Mortell