

Carolinas expected to gain more lawmakers

Census forecasts predict one representative for each state

April 13, 2008

By Robert Morris - rmorris@thesunnews.com

The Sun News

Both North and South Carolina are poised to gain an additional representative in Congress following the 2010 census, many observers say.

This decade's population shifts from north to south - especially along the coast - could boost the political prominence of the Carolinas in general, and the Grand Strand in particular.

"The more people you have in that very powerful branch of government, the better it is for your state," said Tim Storey, a redistricting specialist with the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Unlike the U.S. Senate, which always has two members from each state, membership in the House of Representatives is based on population. Every 10 years, the number of representatives from each state changes based on new census figures.

Using a complex duck-duck-goose scheme, the Census Bureau orders the states by population, then parcels congressional seats out, one at a time, until all 435 are assigned. The formula is so complicated that it has been mathematically proven to have built-in paradoxes, and only a few analysts make projections each year.

Two current rankings mention the Carolinas prominently:

Clark Benson of Polidata Political Data Analysis predicts that each of the Carolinas will receive one new congressional seat, bringing South Carolina to seven and North Carolina to 14. Benson notes, however, that states such as Pennsylvania, Washington and California could overtake either Carolina.

Kimball W. Brace of Election Data Services uses three different models for his apportionment forecast. The two models that use short-term and midrange growth patterns - which he says may be more accurate, given recent housing market fluctuations - both show a new seat for both Carolinas, but the long-term model does not include either state.

For the most part, both analysts show states in the Northeast and Midwest losing seats to Texas, south Atlantic states and the Southwest, reflecting the nation's southerly and westerly population shifts. One notable exception is Louisiana, projected to lose one seat after the large exodus from the state after Hurricane Katrina.

Redrawing the lines

Through population changes over the years, South Carolina has had as many as nine congressmen and as few as four but has kept its present six since the 1930 census. Bobby Bowers, director of the S.C. Office of Research and Statistics, said this year could get close to restoring a seventh.

"If we get a good count and get continued growth, we may approach the threshold," Bowers said.

The state legislature must redraw the congressional district lines after each census to reflect population shifts, whether or not a new seat is added. In either case, the fight to redraw those districts is extremely "contentious and partisan," Storey said, as members of each party and each region jockey to place the most congressional districts in friendly territory.

Because the state legislature is controlled by Republicans, and because even some traditionally Democratic areas of South Carolina have been trending toward the Republican camp, the new district would likely lean Republican no matter where it is drawn, said Neal Thigpen, professor of political science at Francis Marion University.

From a regional standpoint, drawing a new congressional district has a "serious ripple effect," on all the other districts in the state, shrinking them geographically to encompass a smaller population, Storey said.

"There's a general rule that if the fastest growth is in a certain area, that's where the new district goes," Storey said.

In North Carolina, Brunswick is the third-fastest growing county since 2000, but the much larger areas of Raleigh and Charlotte showed extremely rapid growth, in much higher numbers, according to 2007 census estimates. Although Brunswick gained 26,000 residents, Wake County gained 205,000 people, and Mecklenburg County gained 172,000 people.

The coastal and Lowcountry regions have seen the fastest growth in South Carolina since 2000, led by Horry, Beaufort, Dorchester and Charleston counties. Among the redistricting possibilities, Storey agreed, is that Charleston and the Grand Strand could be divided into separate districts.

"If the districts were redrawn today, it's a given that a congressional district could be centered around the Grand Strand," said Brad Dean, president of the Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce, adding that it would increase the likelihood that a congressman might be elected from the area.

U.S. Rep. Henry Brown of Hanahan represents all of Horry County and coastal Georgetown County, plus much of the Lowcountry region. Since the 2000 census, Brown

noted that the population of his district has grown from 668,000 people to more than 800,000 - among the most heavily populated congressional districts in the nation, he said.

After the coming census, he said his district will be redrawn - either as a smaller version or possibly something more radical. Because only part of Charleston County is in his district, he now represents almost as many people from Horry County.

"It could be tough to group Horry and Charleston together in the next congressional redistricting if they continue to grow," Brown said.

Increased clout

Regardless of where the new district lands, receiving one at all would be a boon for the state. Brown said the additional S.C. congressman might be appointed to a House committee where the state previously had no representation. "It gives us one more vote to support the state," Brown said. "We might be able to exert that much more influence."

Rep. Jim Clyburn, who represents a wide swath of rural South Carolina from Columbia to inland Georgetown County, said that many federal money-distribution formulas are based on the the number of congressmen from each state. Interstate 73, for example, may receive federal money faster if South Carolina has seven representatives instead of six.

"If it's not going to South Carolina, it's going somewhere else," Clyburn said. "It's in the state's best interest to make sure everyone goes out and gets counted."

The official census day is April 1, 2010, and the Census Bureau usually makes its formal presentation to Congress just short of nine months later, between Christmas and New Year's Eve, said Cathy McCully, chief of the Census Redistricting Data Office.

"As soon as those numbers are out," McCully said, "then the party begins."

Contact ROBERT MORRIS at 626-0294.