

How S.C. Lawmakers Increase their Odds of Staying in Power

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By Rick Brundrett - The Nerve

Every 10 years, S.C. lawmakers re-exert their authority to draw legislative and congressional district lines based on updated population counts – a typically convoluted process aimed at protecting incumbents.

While the 2020 U.S. Census is underway, state lawmakers quietly are planning to initially spend as much as \$2 million on the “reapportionment” process, or the redrawing of district lines.

How those lines are drawn – largely controlled by legislative leaders – can greatly affect who wins elections, which areas are best represented, and what legislation gets approved.

The 2010 U.S. Census showed that South Carolina’s total population grew by more than 15% over the previous decade, resulting in the creation of a seventh U.S. House seat and realignment of legislative districts.

Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld “partisan gerrymandering,” allowing the political party that controls a state legislature to draw voting maps to help its candidates win elections.

In its recently passed, \$32.3 billion state budget version for fiscal year 2020-21, the S.C. House appropriated \$1 million for its 124-member chamber for “reapportionment expenses,” and approved an additional \$1 million for unspecified “operating” expenses for the 46-member Senate.

Back in November, neither the House nor Senate [would reveal](#) to The Nerve any upcoming spending plans for their respective chambers after missing a legal deadline to file their proposed chamber budgets for fiscal 2021, which starts July 1.

State agencies are required by law to submit their proposed budgets to the governor by Nov. 1. But as The Nerve previously has [reported](#), the Legislature in recent years often has ignored the law when it comes to their own chamber spending plans.

Gov. Henry McMaster in his proposed fiscal 2021 state budget version, which was released in January, recommended appropriating a total of \$22.9 million and \$15.4 million for the House and Senate chambers, respectively.

The House later proposed adding \$1 million each to the House and Senate chamber budgets, though the House version didn’t provide specifics on funding for redrawing legislative and congressional district lines. The Legislature approved similar funding for redistricting costs when the last U.S. Census was done, as The Nerve reported [then](#).

The House and Senate, for example, collectively spent thousands of dollars on outside attorneys to defend the chambers in a federal lawsuit alleging racial gerrymandering in the 2011 redistricting

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Plans, state comptroller general records show.

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The Nerve recently asked House clerk Charles Reid and Senate clerk Jeff Gossett under the S.C. Freedom of Information Act for documents showing how exactly the proposed additional \$1 million for each chamber would be spent.

A House attorney provided only general budget records showing the total requested amount for “reapportionment expenses.” Gossett didn’t provide any records, saying only in a written response: “The Senate has no documents specifically regarding the appropriation beyond what is in the (state budget) bill. However, the primary intention of this is to fund reapportionment and other expenses.”

House records show that Rep. Bruce Bannister, R-Greenville, proposed the additional \$1 million for the House for “one time expenses incurred due to reapportionment.”

The Nerve last week asked Bannister for records related to his budget request, though no documents were provided by publication of this story. Bannister’s proposal was designated in House records as a budget “earmark,” which typically is a funding request for a program or project that didn’t originate with the state agency that would receive the public dollars.

The Nerve earlier this month [revealed](#) more than \$51 million in earmarks in the House’s state budget version, including, for example, \$19 million for a proposed downtown Greenville convention center and \$7.5 million to renovate the Sumter Opera House.

Funding for those projects, as well as the proposed \$1 million House chamber earmark, would come out of \$945.5 million in actual and estimated nonrecurring state revenues, under the House’s state budget version. Whether the overall projected \$1.8 billion-plus surplus for next fiscal year will materialize, however, is uncertain because of the state’s continuing [coronavirus response](#).

Still, the House and Senate chambers have plenty of their own reserves to cover redistricting costs in fiscal 2021. Records show that at the start of this fiscal year, the Senate had \$5.2 million in general fund reserves, while the House had a surplus of \$23.3 million – \$666,401 more than its current total chamber budget.

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