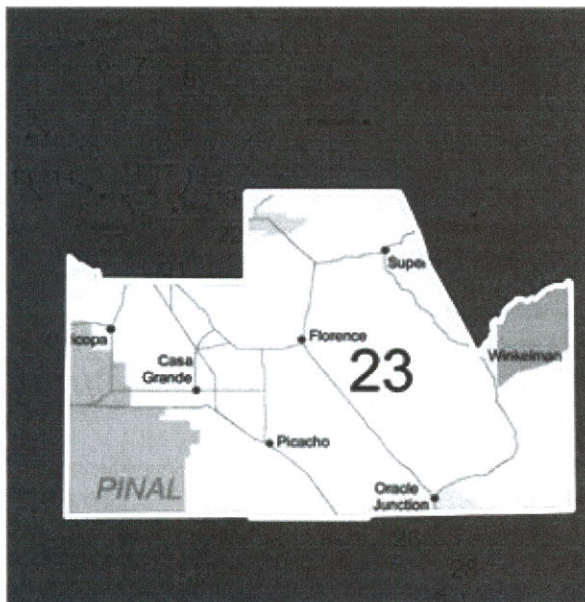


Pinal County no sure thing for congressional seat

by Jeremy Duda

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Explosive growth seemed to assure that Pinal County would anchor one of Arizona's nine congressional districts in 2012, and recently released census data further fueled the speculation.

But few things are guaranteed in redistricting, and a Pinal County-based district isn't one of them.

What the Independent Redistricting Commission does about Pinal County will reverberate across the Arizona's congressional map. By law, the commission must start with a blank slate, and experts say predicting the exact location of the new districts is nothing more than a guessing game for now.

A number of sometimes-competing factors will guide the IRC's decisions, including a massive increase in Pinal County's population, the number and location of minority-majority districts and whether to create a purely rural district, as the first commission did.

"Literally there's no way to speculate as to where the new lines could go," said Douglas Johnson, who served as a consultant for Arizona's first IRC, which started its work a decade ago.

Most speculation has put Pinal County, which more than doubled its population in the past decade and now has 375,000 residents, in the middle of a new congressional district that would likely jut into the East Valley to meet the population requirements for the congressional districts. Each of the state's nine congressional districts, an increase of one over the current number, will have about 710,000 people.

But Johnson, president of the California-based firm National Demographics Corporation, said Pinal County could just as easily be split between two or more districts that would stretch into the state's largest urban areas, centered on Phoenix and Tucson.

Arizona is required by the 1965 Voting Rights Act to create some congressional districts that are likely to elect minority candidates, a requirement the first IRC satisfied with the south Phoenix-based District 4, and District 7, which covers south Tucson and southwestern Arizona. The state's Latino population jumped from 25 percent to nearly 30 percent in the past decade, and some say the IRC could create a third minority-majority district.

"Is there enough population push for a third majority-minority district?" Mario Diaz, a lobbyist, said. "The case can be made for that."

But creating a third minority-majority district might siphon off Democratic voters from other districts, in effect turning them over to Republican dominance. Some argue that the IRC can increase minority representation while drawing more competitive districts, but others on both sides of the aisle are skeptical.

Alan Maguire, a consultant who worked on Arizona's 1980 and 1990 redistricting processes, said it would be difficult to create a third minority-majority district due to the way Arizona's Latino population is clustered geographically.

"You can have 5 percent growth, but if the 5 percent growth is really Hispanic families moving into traditionally non-majority areas, then they're diffused," Maguire said. "My guess is that might be pretty hard to do, given the population counts."

Perhaps the biggest determining factor, however, will be the fate of Arizona's 1st Congressional District, a sprawling mass that stretches from the Four Corners to Pinal County. Former IRC Chairman Steve Lynn said the first commission was dedicated to creating an all-rural district, and that dictated what much of the rest of the map looked like.

If the current IRC decides not to continue the policy — and no law forces it to do so — nearly all of the state's congressional districts probably would start in the Phoenix or the Tucson area, and radiate out into rural Arizona, like the spokes of a wheel, Lynn said.

"If they decide that big rural district is not something they want to replicate, it changes the ballgame completely on the congressional," Lynn said.

Without an all-rural district, Lynn said, the IRC could create districts by starting in an urban area and reaching out into rural parts of the state.

The 2nd Congressional District, which starts in the northwest Valley and reaches all the way to Kingman, and the 6th Congressional District, which includes Chandler, Gilbert and Mesa, each have nearly

1 million people following Arizona's population boom of the past decade, meaning the districts representing those areas will have to be smaller in 2012.

In contrast, the north Phoenix-based 3rd Congressional District falls just short of the 710,000-person threshold for the new congressional districts, and the 5th Congressional District, which covers Scottsdale and Tempe, has only 656,000.

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