

TESTIMONY

TO: Honorable Members of the Senate Redistricting Committee

FROM: Rabbi Shlomo Soroka

RE: Subject Matter On: Illinois Communities and the boundaries of Illinois Congressional, Legislative and Representative Districts

DATE: Thursday, April 8, 2021

Chairman Aquino, Sub-chairman Senator Villivalam, President McConchie, and honored members of this committee:

Our constitution, and these hearings, recognize the need to consider communities of interest in the mapmaking process to ensure they have representation and a voice in government. To achieve that goal, ethnic and racial communities, as well as other communities of interest, have often been grouped in the same legislative districts.

The Orthodox Jewish community, which I represent, is one that unfortunately is often overlooked as a community of interest, despite our unique needs and interests. This community, which has grown significantly over the last decade, is primarily concentrated in the West Ridge area of Chicago, spilling over into Skokie and Lincolnwood.

We have unique and nuanced views on public policies that impact religious liberties, education, and social services. The community infrastructure, socio-economic composition, priorities and interests reflect those unique views and characteristics.

Here's a bit of historical background and the current demographics

The Orthodox Jewish community has been a significant part of the Illinois' social fabric since the early 1800s. In the latter half of the 19th Century, approximately 100,000 Orthodox Jewish immigrants settled in the Maxwell Street area, all concentrated within two square miles. Many worked as pushcart peddlers and shopkeepers. In the 1920's they began to migrate to Lawndale and Albany Park. Then, in the 1950's they moved north to West Rogers Park and Skokie, where new Jewish day schools were established. Until that point in time, the lack of a strong Jewish day school system made it challenging for families to raise their children as Orthodox Jews. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Jewish leaders understood that a strong Jewish day school infrastructure was needed to rebuild, ensuring the continuity of our culture and integrity of our faith. With this new system, the number of Jews that identified as Orthodox began to rebound and experience a resurgence. In the 1960's the largest Jewish neighborhoods, including Jews of other denominations, were in West Rogers Park and Skokie. Over the last 70 years, most Jews have suburbanized and migrated out, but the Orthodox community has remained and grown, with

exponential growth over the last 15 years or so. A 2010 JUF survey estimated there to be 21,000 Orthodox Jews in the area. Current estimates put that number at approximately 30,000. Over the last decade, enrollment in Orthodox Jewish schools has increased by over 50%, six new schools have opened, and five new major synagogues been built. There are also five new kollels, which are centers for adult Torah study and rabbinical training, as well as the greatest catalysts for Orthodox Jewish community growth. In the past five years alone, over 300 families have moved into the community and over 30 retail stores have opened. Our neighborhoods are not only the center of Illinois' Orthodox Jewish community but are the epicenter of Midwest Orthodox Jewry.

Regarding the socioeconomics,

It's important to note that we tend to have large families; ten-plus household members are fairly common. With many children and the expenses associated with Orthodox living, many Orthodox breadwinners who are in the top 10% to 20% of income earners still struggle to afford basics, including food items, as kosher food tends to be more expensive. Poverty in the community is unfortunately quite common. Over 40% of the children in our schools who participate in the National School Lunch Program are on Free or Reduced Lunch, but due to the additional financial obligations our families have, over 90% receive some subsidy. Most of those who don't qualify for government programs based on federal poverty guidelines are still struggling financially.

Due to the need to be within walking distance of our synagogues and near our schools and kosher food outlets, we all live in the same areas; there are no "rich neighborhoods" or "poor neighborhoods." The wealthy, the middle-class, and the poor all live side by side, attend the same synagogues, and send their children to the same schools. As such, there are many poor families who get overlooked by government programs that target low-income neighborhoods.

Regarding community safety and security

Our community also has unique needs. Orthodox Jews are visibly identifiable from afar and are more exposed on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays when travel by car is prohibited. With anti-Semitism on the rise both globally and locally, and many recent violent attacks specifically targeting Orthodox Jews, this is a real concern.

I'd also like to share a bit about Orthodox Jewish religious culture and our community organizations

We gather for communal prayers and religious studies two to three times a day. We have more than 60 synagogues in our neighborhoods—perhaps the highest concentration of places of worship in the state. We also have a plethora of nonprofit organizations that provide an array of social services with cultural sensitivity. Our schools are located across 24 buildings.

The community's close-knit nature, culture of giving, methods of communication and strong infrastructure allows us to mobilize quickly and effectively for any important cause. Be it political engagement, galvanizing volunteers for emergency initiatives, or to address any other issue, we are able to reach virtually the entire community even on short notice. The collaborative spirit that is so prevalent among our community leaders and organizations allows us to be nimble and effective in ways that few others can duplicate.

This infrastructure creates unique needs, as well as potential for public-private partnerships. Examples include Hatzalah, our volunteer first responder ambulance corps, that compliments the great work of Chicago and Cook County EMS; KiwiKids, our pandemic food box program currently providing over 250,000 kosher meals a month to both Jewish and non-Jewish families suffering from food insecurity; and our new volunteer-operated vaccine clinic. Through partnering with other community-based organizations and government agencies, we have vaccinated thousands of hard-to-reach vulnerable and elderly people.

Our top issue is arguably education

As mentioned before, we have a network of over 20 schools in the Greater Chicago Area with over 5,000 students. We have the largest Jewish school in the Midwest and our school system attracts families from across the country. Our approach to education has a rich history, and has been adapted to prepare our children for a successful life in the modern world without compromising on 2,000 years of tradition. Our schools produce graduates who go on to have successful careers in virtually every sector while remaining true to their heritage. We believe in a strong and well-funded public educational system but for the vast majority of our children, public school is simply not an option. As history has painfully taught us, our very existence is in peril without a strong Jewish day school system.

There are many other issues unique to the Orthodox Jewish community

New issues are always coming up that affect the Orthodox Jewish community in ways that aren't relevant to other communities. A memorable example was a bill that allowed for Sunday burials, allowing Orthodox Jews to uphold the traditional dignity and respect of Jewish decedents. Since it was legislation pushed for by the Orthodox community, Governor Thompson famously held the signing at the Telshe Yeshiva of Chicago, the "Harvard" of Midwest Talmudic colleges. Other recent examples include a bill that ensured milk that wasn't kosher needed to be labeled as such, a bill to allow our first responders to use oscillating lights, and three bills currently assigned to committees that would make Daylight Savings Time permanent all year-round. With Jewish prayer times dependent on sunrise and sunset, this is an issue that could force many observant Jews to choose between religious life and their livelihoods.

Conclusion:

As mentioned earlier, it is estimated that approximately 30,000 Jewish Illinoisans identify as Orthodox, with most living in the same geographic area. Much of this area is contained within the boundaries of the 8th Senate District. Approximately 20% of Orthodox Jewish households, however, are in the 9th Senate District despite their contiguity, communal cohesion, and interdependence. Some district lines run right through the heart of our neighborhoods in Skokie and Peterson Park/Pulaski Park. In our experience, being a significant constituency in a district is vital to having representation in the legislature that will be a champion for our issues.

In any new map, we would like to see our community consolidated as much as possible. While we are hopeful improvements will be made, we are very concerned about the possibility of experiencing the opposite. Our community may be at risk of being divided to the point of political irrelevance. I respectfully ask you on behalf of my community to ensure that doesn't happen and to make the greatest effort possible to further consolidate us so that we can be heard among the voices of the people.