

TESTIMONY ON REDISTRICTING

TO: Honorable Members of the House and Senate Redistricting Committees

FROM: Rabbi Shlomo Soroka

RE: Subject Matter On: 2020 Census and adjustments to the General Assembly Redistricting Act of 2021

DATE: Monday, August 30, 2021

To quote the late Yogi Berra, it feels like Déjà vu all over again. I testified at every opportunity in before House and Senate committees in April before the preliminary maps were released. I believed that this committee wanted the input of communities of interest. I reached out to numerous legislators and did everything within my power to convey the importance of keeping our community together in a single district, or to at least hold us harmless in this process and pleaded that we wouldn't be carved up more than we already were. When the preliminary maps were released in May, it became apparent that despite endless hearings, testimony, engaging legislators and a media campaign, not only were we not further consolidated, but the exact opposite was done. We were further split and divided, diluting our political voice to the point where we could be easily ignored. Again, on May 26, I testified before this body and was pleasantly surprised to learn that adjustments were made to accommodate our community. On May 27, the Senate and House Democrats released a statement that read:

"This proposed map is the product of countless hours of testimony from advocacy, community, and grassroots organizations, as well as individuals who care deeply about their communities. Their passion and dedication were vital to this process, which has resulted in a fair map..."

"Among the changes made in the revised version of the proposed legislative map is a request from the Orthodox Jewish community. While maintaining the integrity of surrounding districts, as well as requests from other members of the public, the revisions will keep more of the Orthodox Jewish community united."

While it wasn't exactly what we asked for, the new map was indeed an improvement. But it neglected to address our southern border where more than 3,000 constituents were cut off from the rest of the community and placed in the 15th House district. After the Census data was released and it became apparent that the 15th House District would have to concede some of its population, we requested that even if enhancements could not be made, at least restore the area containing those constituents who were previously in the 16th House District but now found themselves in a different district. Based on Census data, restoring the 2011 district line, which would hold us harmless in this process, would not have exceeded the number of

constituents that the 15th House District would be losing anyway. It seemed like a very reasonable request.

Imagine our surprise when the new maps were released today and we saw that once again, even more families were siphoned off from the 16th House district, further dividing us and diluting our political influence. What happened to the statements proclaiming how vital we were to the process and making revisions that “will keep more of the Orthodox Jewish community united”?

I will now share my screen so you can visualize what I’m describing. In the image (House district 16 proposed map) there’s a black border encircling the area we proposed as the 16th House district. The yellow line is the 2011 border, and you can see how it runs through the blue colored neighborhood. The red line is where the line runs in the maps released today. The entire blue shaded area, which represents a heavy Orthodox Jewish presence, has been cut off from the 16th House District.

In the second image I zoom in on the area where we proposed a district line. The 2011 line drawn in red. The local synagogues are encircled in yellow. This entire area is now in the 15th house district based on the preliminary maps released today.

The only rational explanation I can think of how these revisions came to be made is that this was indeed an attempt to keep more of our community united except someone inadvertently moved the line eastward instead of west. I refuse to believe that this was done intentionally but if it was a mistake, it’s not too late to fix.