

Marinette, EagleHerald

Draw new legislative maps ‘in the light of day’

If you want the Wisconsin Legislature to operate in an open and transparent manner, there’s a provision tucked in Gov. Tony Evers’ budget that deserves support.

Consider it an early gift for Sunshine Week March 14-20—the week that journalists have set aside to promote open government.

Every 10 years, after results of the U.S. Census are completed, Wisconsin legislators who are in the majority party draw the boundaries for congressional and legislative districts to keep up with population shifts.

Every 10 years, whether it’s the Democrats or the Republicans, the party in charge draws those lines to their party’s benefit.

The gerrymandering that followed the 2010 redistricting was especially partisan.

GUEST OPINION

La Crosse
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La Crosse, Wisconsin

On Page 125 of his budget, the governor suggests the process be conducted “in the light of day.”

We have long advocated that Wisconsin switch to a redistricting model similar to the nonpartisan process used in Iowa.

For his part, the governor has created a People’s Maps Commission that has been working for several months seeking input from people statewide.

Under his proposal, the new legislative maps “will be drawn not by any political party or high-paid consultants, but by the people of our state. If the Legislature

chooses to draw their own maps, they will be required to do so in the light of day, in the public eye, and with public input by requiring public meetings for the map-drawing process.”

As we’ve written so many times, the people should be choosing their elected officials—not the other way around.

Worse, the Legislature has exempted itself from key provisions in the state’s open-records and open-meetings laws.

Your city and village officials are required to be open with citizens. If you write a complaint to a local elected official, law requires that official to keep it on file—and produce it upon request—for seven years.

But when it comes to redistricting, legislators have given themselves a pass when it comes to transparency. They have

exempted themselves from the laws that they require others to follow.

That means legislators can and do destroy what should be public records that would show the public the process they use to develop the new maps—and the people pushing the levers—when it comes to deciding key elements of our democracy.

As Evers writes in his budget: “It is not appropriate that because the Legislature wrote themselves out of Wisconsin’s public records law, they were able to destroy many of the public records from the last redistricting process. The goal for any strong democracy should be that the people get to choose their elected officials, not the other way around. Wisconsin-ites do not want maps that favor any political candidate or party—we just want maps where either

candidate can win. It is time we look to the people, not politicians, to draw maps that are fair and impartial.”

When it comes to how our government operates in a democracy, demanding openness is not asking too much.

In a 2017 Your Right to Know column, Bill Lueders, who is president of the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council, wrote: “Wisconsin lawmakers should not be destroying records they create and receive in their official, taxpayer-funded capacity. Every legislator and all candidates for this office should be asked, by citizens and the media, whether they will work to end this exemption. “Otherwise, the public should be looking for other representation.”

In the spirit of Sunshine Week, those words hold true today.