

## 2026 INDIANA GENERAL ASSEMBLY

# Redistricting plan set for House vote

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The Indiana House is set to approve Friday an unusual mid-decade reshaping of the state's nine congressional districts specifically to advantage Republican candidates in next year's U.S. House elections.

The vote by the Republican-controlled chamber will come only four days after the new map was publicly released Monday and despite lawmakers receiving minimal input from the millions of Hoosiers whose representative in Congress is poised to change.

On Thursday, House Democrats spent more than two hours trying to persuade the Republican supermajority to consider rewriting, slowing or stopping the redistricting plan in House Bill 1032.

All 15 attempts were rejected on

nearly party-line votes.

"What is happening here is absolutely not honorable, and it doesn't represent the people of the state of Indiana," said state Rep. Randy Novak, D-Michigan City.

The revisions proposed by Democrats included postponing redistricting until lawmakers tackle Indiana's soaring energy, health care and child care costs; submitting the redistricting plan for voter approval; prioritizing communities of interest over partisanship in redistricting; and mandating non-partisan redistricting.

"We know that gerrymandering is bad for democracy — no matter who does it. Let's not double down," said state Rep. Carey Hamilton, D-Indianapolis.

The Republicans voted against a recommendation by state Rep. Vernon Smith, D-Gary, to require

the state to reimburse county election officials for their added expenses to implement the new maps ahead of the Jan. 7 start to candidate filing and the May 5 primary election.

A follow-up suggestion by state Rep. Earl Harris Jr., D-East Chicago, merely to study the implementation costs of redistricting was also rejected.

"What happened to Republicans being the party of fiscal responsibility?" Harris asked. "They know mid-decade redistricting is unpopular, and a study on the cost might force them to admit that their policies are both unpopular and costly to Hoosiers."

Other nixed Democratic suggestions ran the gamut from evaluating the impact of the new map on minority voters to mandating disclosure of the names of the individuals who actually drew the

new Indiana congressional district map at the Virginia-based, National Republican Redistricting Trust.

"This thing came out of the sky and fell upon us. Well, who was up in the sky preparing it?" wondered state Rep. Ed Delaney, D-Indianapolis.

State Rep. Ben Smaltz, R-Auburn, the sponsor of the redistricting legislation, repeatedly urged his GOP colleagues to vote against changing it because Smaltz said it was carefully crafted "for partisan performance only" in next year's congressional elections.

Smaltz did say he would welcome Congress setting nationwide redistricting standards. Until then, however, he insisted it is Indiana's right to alter its congressional districts solely to benefit the Republican Party.

Under the plan, the current 1st Congressional District of Lake, Porter and northwest LaPorte counties — a community of interest centered on the Lake Michigan shoreline served by U.S. Rep. Frank J. Mrvan, D-Highland — would be split into two pieces that sprawl east nearly to Ohio in the hope of replacing Mrvan with a Republican.

The House vote will not be the end of Indiana's redistricting debate. The new map must also be approved by the Republican-controlled Senate and Republican Gov. Mike Braun to take effect.

Senate President Rod Bray, R-Martinsville, repeatedly has warned redistricting advocates, including Republican President Donald Trump, that the "votes aren't there" to approve a new map when the Senate convenes next week.

## Environmental legal aid program reach grows

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"I've always personally been interested in the environment," Rachel Schwartz, an attorney at the Conservation Law Center, told The Times. "But what I've wanted to do in my career is support access to justice for people who have been in some way excluded or disadvantaged in our justice system. And I think in Northwest Indiana, there's a way that I can bring those two interests together."

The Bloomington-based nonprofit that she works for provides free legal services to advocacy groups and individual community members with environmental concerns.

Schwartz graduated from the University of Chicago law and public policy dual degree program in the spring and joined CLC through a University of Chicago Law School Public Service Fellowship.

The organization's Northwest Indiana operation, which focuses on Gary, East Chicago, Hammond and Whiting, had previously been a one-man enterprise run by veteran attorney Michael Zoeller. Having Schwartz on board, Zoeller told The Times, has been a major step up for CLC's capabilities in the Region.

Since joining CLC early last year, Zoeller has tackled a variety of local environmental issues. He is currently representing the activist and Gary resident Gary Lee in a lawsuit against the Little Calumet River Basin Development Commission.

Lee sued the commission in August 2025, alleging, among other claims, that the body's then-ongoing lease agreement with Merrillville-based Maya Energy violated the commission's statutory-defined purpose. The company planned to build a waste-to-feedstock processing facility on a parcel of commission-owned land on 35th Avenue in Gary.

Lee also claimed that the commission had violated Indiana's Open Door Law by discussing improper topics in closed executive sessions and that two of its members were legally ineligible for their seats.

A Lake County judge sided with the commission on all three claims, finding that the body did not break the law. Lee brought the case to the Indiana Court of Appeals, where the matter is awaiting a ruling.

The end of Maya Energy's Gary development ambitions in October, which the company's co-owner blamed on a noncooperative city administration, marked a significant victory for the project's critics. It does not necessarily mean, however, that litigation on the subject is over.

On Oct. 23, the commission voted to terminate its agreement with Maya Energy, and Nov. 10, the body filed to have Lee's appeal partially dismissed on the basis that his complaint about the lease had been rendered moot. In a response filed on Lee's behalf, Zoeller wrote that the court should still rule on the issue "because it raises an issue of great public im-



Rachel Schwartz and Michael Zoeller are attorneys with the Conservation Law Center.

portance likely to recur."

"It's not just Mr. Lee," Zoeller said. "There's plenty of other people who care about making the commission more transparent and accountable and keeping it close to its statutory purposes."

Litigation is only a small part of the work that CLC does. Much of Zoeller and Schwartz's time is spent on lower-profile activities — fielding questions from concerned community members, reviewing environmental records and lobbying permitting authorities.

Last year, CLC joined a coalition of environmental groups working on behalf of East Chicago residents who sought stricter state oversight for a local waste processor with a history of violating environmental regulations. Schwartz, then a law student, participated in the effort as part of the University of Chicago's Abrams Environmental Law Clinic. The Indiana Department of Environmental Management acknowledged the input it had received from the groups when it added more stringent provisions to a renewed operating permit for the facility.

On behalf of a group of Gary residents, Zoeller has been monitoring court proceedings surrounding an illegal junkyard on West 11th Avenue and drafting periodic reports to help demystify the sometimes arcane process. The city first sued Andy's Truck & Equipment Company in 2005 for operating without proper zoning or a valid business license, kicking off a two-decade-long legal struggle with the company's owner. In October, a bankruptcy court authorized the sale of the property and its stock of vehicle parts to a local developer.

Zoeller said that he has toured the site with its new owner and plans to keep abreast of its cleanup and redevelopment.

Earlier this month, Schwartz urged East Chicago's Board of Zoning Appeals to exercise caution in its approach to an Illinois metal recycler's bid to open a facility in the city. Aurora-based

Universal Metal Recycling asked the city to approve a special-use exception that would pave the way for a new recycling facility on Euclid Avenue. The site eyed by the company sits just south of George Washington Elementary School and Block Stadium and less than 1000 feet from St. Catherine Hospital.

In a letter to the board, Schwartz urged the body to seek more information from the company before taking action, including the type of machinery that would be installed and the steps the company would take to control particulate emissions from a metal shredder.

"The Conservation Law Center does not oppose responsible development," she wrote. "Rather, we work to promote community members' conservation and environmental health goals. In this instance, we hope to support the continued use and enjoyment of invaluable community resources and to ensure the individuals and organizations we work with have enough information to participate meaningfully in the conversation."

The East Chicago BZA ultimately voted to deliver an unfavorable recommendation on the item to the East Chicago Common Council, which will take a final vote on the matter later this month.

Though their focus is on northern Lake County, Zoeller said that he and Schwartz have occasionally provided guidance to those living further afield, including Porter County residents with environmental objections to new data center developments. He stressed that CLC is willing to hear out anyone interested in keeping their community clean and safe, and will provide support where possible.

"I do think there are a lot of folks who do have some concerns or have a question that we could provide some information, you know, and be a resource," Zoeller said. "We're not looking to do anything, right? Our job is to help other people make their environment better."

## Bird flu outbreak spreads in Ind.

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A suspected infection of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), also known as bird flu, has been detected in a third county in northeast Indiana.

Noble County joined neighboring LaGrange and Elkhart counties this week at the center of a bird flu resurgence impacting agricultural producers of ducks, egg-laying chickens and broiler chickens near Indiana's borders with Michigan and Ohio.

The State Board of Animal Health (BOAH) has so far quarantined 6,490 commercial meat ducks in Noble County.

It's the first time bird flu has been detected there since the current HPAI outbreak began in 2022, records show.

Altogether, BOAH quarantined 71,804 ducks and 122,545 egg-laying chickens in northeast Indiana due to suspected bird flu between Nov. 25 and Wednesday.

Much of the quarantined fowl has already been destroyed following confirmation of HPAI infection. The remaining birds are also slated to be depopulated if their bird flu tests come back positive.

Since mid-October, more than 250,000 ducks and approximately 700,000 egg-laying chickens have been quarantined or destroyed after bird flu roared back following a six-month lull in new cases at Indiana commercial producers.

A more widespread HPAI outbreak during the first three months of the year required the destruction of more than 8 million Indiana chickens and caused the price of eggs to soar.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention asserts the public health risk for HPAI is low. It's possible for humans to contract HPAI, though no cases have been confirmed in Indiana, according to the Department of Health.

Bird flu does not present a food safety risk. BOAH says cooked poultry and eggs and pasteurized dairy products are safe to eat.

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## State page program applications open

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Hoosier students in grades 6 through 12 interested in getting a firsthand look at the state's legislature branch in action can now apply to spend a day as a page for lawmakers serving in the Indiana House or Senate.

Legislative pages typically take a behind-the-scenes Statehouse tour, meet their local representative or senator and learn how laws are made by watching debates inside the House or Senate chamber.

They may also be asked to assist lawmakers and legislative staff with age-appropriate tasks, such as delivering messages or organizing files.

"I am always happy to welcome students to the Statehouse, especially those from Senate District 1 who travel so far to learn more about their state government," said state Sen. Dan Dornale, R-Highland.

"This is a great introduction to the legislative process, and I encourage local students to participate in one of our many paging days."

Pages serve from 8:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m., Indianapolis time, on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays during the 2026 legislative session.

Individuals selected as pages must arrange their own transportation to and from the Statehouse. Paging is considered an excused absence for school attendance purposes.

Pages are selected by the political parties in each chamber. Positions fill quickly, so it is important to apply as soon as possible.

To apply, look for the student paging opportunities link at one of the following websites: indianasenatepublics.com; indianasenateDemocrats.org; indianahousepublics.com; or indianahousedemocrats.org.

## 2 honored with award from public defender

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CROWN POINT — Lake County Chief Public Defender Marce Gonzalez Jr. recently honored two individuals for providing outstanding service to the county office tasked with representing indigent criminal defendants in court.

Gonzalez presented "The Chief's Award" to Scott Schmal, Lake County finance director, and

attorney Felipe Sanchez, to recognize their status as "a friend who supports and shares the vision of the Public Defender Office."

Gonzalez said Sanchez was selected for his great work, dedication and counsel as a member of the Lake County Public Defender Board, while Schmal was celebrated for his professionalism and non-partisan approach to understanding the office's budget needs.