

Redistricting Means Many New Faces

Written by Rich Miller

Sunday, 07 August 2011 05:41

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Redistricting is a time for stock-taking, for looking back and looking ahead.

State legislators who've been around a while are suddenly faced with the often stark reality of signing on for another 10 years. They add a decade to their current age and wonder if they want to be in the game that much longer.

Some decide to stick with it for just one more election so they can make extra sure their party holds their seat.

Some decide to retire right away, figuring their party has drawn the map solidly enough to ensure a suitable replacement.

Legislators in the minority party are far more likely to be mapped in with fellow party members and then discover that they don't want to face the prospect of running in a primary, so they retire.

Others decide to use the opportunity to move up the political ladder. The congressional districts were redrawn, which gave state Senator Dave Koehler (D-Peoria) a possible opening. He took it.

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If history is any guide, we're likely to see a raft of retirement announcements in the next few days, weeks, months and even years.

The numbers so far have been impressive. Republican Senator Larry Bomke and GOP Representatives David Winters and Franco Coladipietro have already announced that they aren't running again. Democratic Representative Dan Reitz resigned last month and was replaced by the son of Congressman Jerry Costello, Jerry Costello II. Some didn't even wait for the new map to be finished, such as Senators Rickey Hendon, Brad Burzynski, Dale Risinger, Lou Viverito and Gary Dahl. The rumor mill is ablaze with speculation about other impending retirements, resignations, and people moving up the ladder.

There are those who think that the players never change in Springfield. Not true. And the remap years are a major reason people move on.

I started writing about Illinois politics in 1990. Not a single incumbent state Senator from that year is still serving today. Senate President John Cullerton was around back then, but he was in the House.

And while Michael Madigan was elected House speaker before I was legally able to drink alcohol, only a small handful of House members from 1990 are still around. Madigan started out in 1971. House Majority Leader Barb Currie's first year was 1979. Representative David Harris started in 1983, but was beaten in 1992 and then came back this year. Representatives Mary Flowers and Ron Stephens were sworn into office in 1985, and Representatives Lou Lang and Monique Davis came along two years later. Representative David Leitch was first appointed to the Senate in 1986 and started his House service in 1989. That's just eight people out of 118 seats – or less than 7 percent.

Donne Trotter (1988), Jeff Schoenberg (1990), and Cullerton (1979) were also in the House back in 1990, but they're now in the Senate.

The point is that I'm never truly surprised when a legislator announces his or her retirement. But despite all that history, I was a bit taken aback when Senator Susan Garrett (D-Lake Forest) announced last month that she wouldn't run again.

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Garrett, who turned 61 in February, is one of those people you figure would never go away. Although she represents the tony North Shore, she seemed to thrive on the bare-knuckled aspect of day-to-day politics.

But Garrett said last month that she came to the conclusion that she “didn’t want to be a career politician.”

I was also a little shocked when Representative Ron Stephens (R-Greenville) abruptly resigned last week. Except for two years in exile when he lost his seat in 1990 and won it back when the Republicans gave him a new district in the 1991 remap, Stephens has been around for what seems like forever.

The Democrats mapped Stephens into the same district as Representative John Cavaletto (R-Salem). Stephens, however, could’ve moved into a neighboring GOP district and likely have run opposed.

Then again, the economy is not all that conducive to selling real estate these days – a problem that is weighing far more heavily on Republican incumbents than ever before during past remap games.

Despite the perception, legislators as a group are not wealthy people. Most are facing the same problems as everyone else. Many of their homes are practically unsellable in the current economy or are “underwater,” or both. Purchasing or renting another home in a new district is simply not an option for many pols these days.

The bottom line is that change is coming. Or at least lots of new faces.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.