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Making sense of the Census

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Census Day, April 1, 2010, has come and gone. Now what?

Well, if you haven't mailed your 10-question form back, do it now. If you didn't receive a form, contact a Question Assistance Center in Durango or Ignacio for a form. Save the Census Bureau money: Don't make a census worker call or come to your home for your form.

The decennial census has been called the basis of our representative democracy. And it's not just about the money. We all know by this time that our share of funds from numerous federal programs over the next 10 years is determined by our population, at the rate of approximately \$890 per person per year for residents of Colorado. But this wasn't the original purpose of census.

The U.S. Constitution mandates an actual count of all people living in the United States once every 10 years for the purpose of apportioning the seats in the U.S. House of Representatives. The results of this process ensure a balance of power based on

population; in short, equal representation per person, in the House. The same principle carries down through our state Legislature to the La Plata County Commission districts and the 9-R School Board electoral districts. Let's see how: In December of this year, the Census Bureau will report to President Obama the populations of all the states and the number of House seats apportioned to each state. According to "The World in 2010," The Economist's "annual collection of predictions for the year ahead," Iowa, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio and Pennsylvania are each expected to lose one seat, while Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nevada and Utah will likely gain one seat, and Texas stands to gain three. Colorado is expected to retain its seven congressional representatives. These estimates are based on the Census Bureau's annual American Community Survey, which statistically samples the population across the country using a much more detailed form.

Next comes the difficult job - redistricting electoral districts at the state and local level, based on the population numbers and distribution reported to each governor and state legislature by March 2011. The standards used for redistricting are based on requirements of the U.S. Constitution, state constitutions and laws, and various U.S. Supreme Court rulings over the years. Each state controls its own redistricting processes.

In Colorado, the redrawing of the state legislative districts is done by the nonpartisan appointed Reapportionment Commission and approved by the Colorado Supreme Court. The seven congressional districts will be redrawn by the state Legislature. The latter process has been time-consuming and contentious in the past. Efforts of recent years to have a nonpartisan commission redraw the congressional districts as well as the state legislative districts have not been successful.

What will be the likely outcome of the redrawing of these two sets of districts? The state demographer's office says that the Western Slope has been growing at an average rate of 2.3 percent, faster than the state as a whole. That likely means that the 3rd Congressional District, currently the geographically largest, represented by Rep. John Salazar, will shrink somewhat and other congressional districts will spread out to take up the space. That will mean Salazar's attention will not be spread so thin and other congressional representatives may have the incentive to pay a little more attention to the Western Slope as well, depending on how the lines are redrawn.

As for the state legislative districts, it is possible that the Western Slope will gain more representation in the state Legislature, based on our proportionally greater population compared to the 2000 census. All this adds up to more power for the Western Slope.

Local elective districts will be reviewed for redistricting based on population as well. According to La Plata County Clerk Linda Daley, the County Geographic Information Systems group, which has been involved in the Census 2010 process right along, will draft three or four scenarios of redrawn commissioner district and precinct lines. Using advanced software, natural and visible barriers will be taken into account when equalizing populations as much as possible. The ultimate decision as to which plan is selected will be made by the county commissioners with input from representatives of both political parties, and the public via a public hearing.

School electoral districts, as distinguished from school attendance districts, are also required by state statute to be rebalanced by population every four years, according to superintendent assistant Kristi Rodri. The District 9-R is the only county school district divided into electoral

districts, so it is the only one affected by the redistricting requirement. Census data and any other relevant data the county has is used by 9-R for redistricting and broadly by all school districts to predict population growth in various age groups and parts of the districts, as well as to predict the need for English language learning, ensure appropriate class sizes, etc.

The city of Durango and the towns of Bayfield and Ignacio all elect their council members or board trustees at large so they have no municipal electoral districts within their boundaries to be redistricted.

According to board member Pam Patton, La Plata Electric Association, a rural electric co-operative business, does not come under the same rules as the political entities previously discussed; however, its own bylaws require that its four districts be as nearly equal in size, as measured by number of members, as possible, respecting political boundaries. In the LPEA context, a member is any residence or business that has an electric meter. Districts are reviewed each year before the election, based on LPEA records of members.

As complicated as this process is, it results in our best possible assurance of the one person-one vote principle.

Our responsibility is to oversee the process for fairness at all levels and then make our equalized, individual voices heard.

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