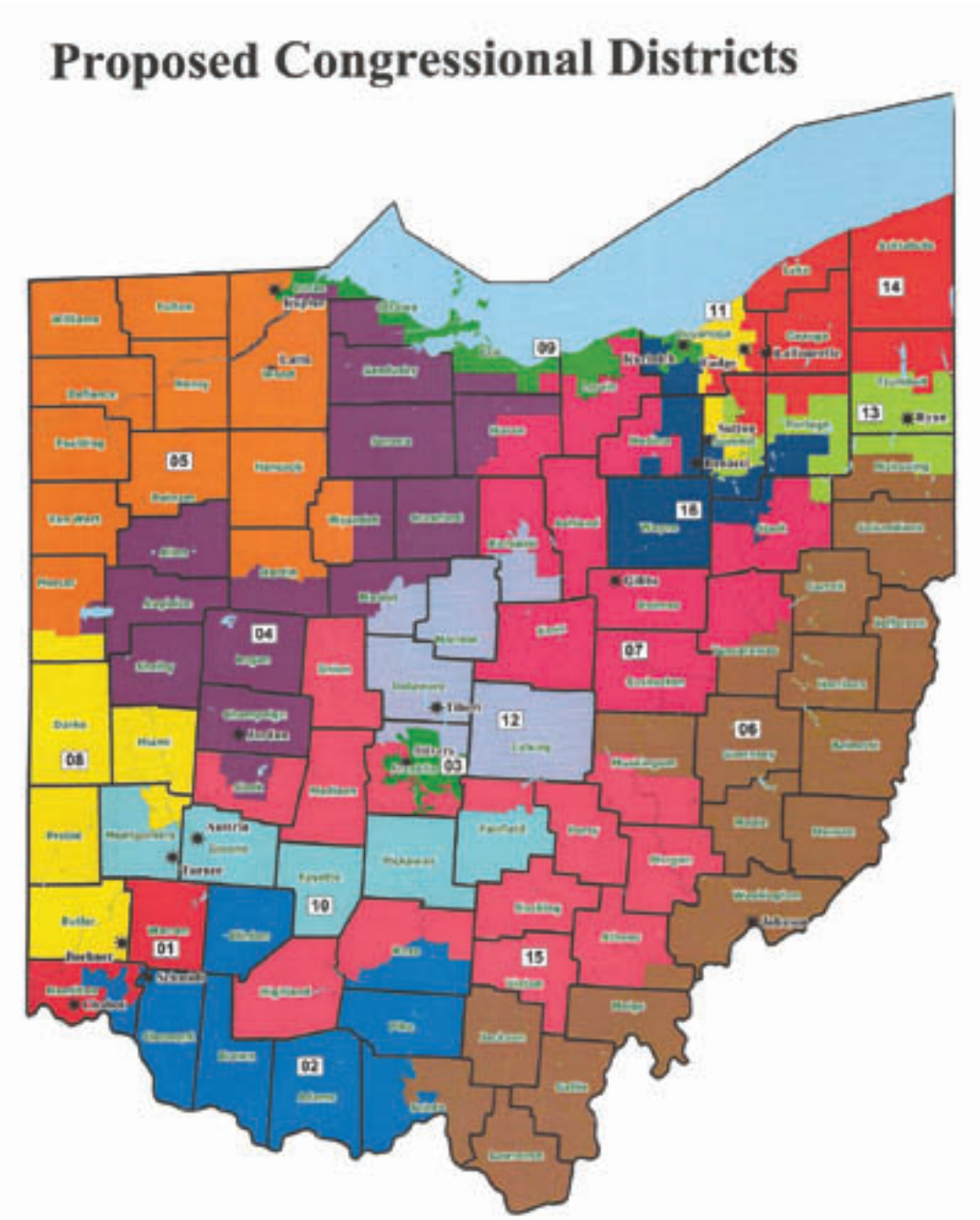

A new congressional map needs to be adopted by Dec. 7, or 90 days before the March 6 primary, at the earliest.

By JAMES W. WADE III

Staff Reporter

A Republican-drawn map of new congressional districts cleared the Ohio House last week despite claims from most Democrats that the measure was rushed through and the new boundaries unfairly benefit GOP candidates.

The proposal passed on a 56-36 vote. Three Democrats voted in support, while five Republicans voted against it. It now goes to the Republican-controlled Senate.

New lines are drawn after each census to reflect changes in population. Because of slow population growth in the last decade, the state's congressional delegation is shrinking to 16 from 18. The proposed U.S. House districts will affect Ohio congressional politics for the next decade.

The proposal would also add a new Democrat-leaning district in Columbus, which won praise from the president of the Ohio Legislative Black Caucus, State Rep. Sandra Williams. She was one of three Black lawmakers from Cleveland who voted in favor of the map. The GOP touted the bipartisan support.

Ahead of the vote, Williams shared that she saw the new Columbus-area district as a good chance for minority candidates to get elected. Ohio has only one Black member of Congress, U.S. Rep. Marcia Fudge of Cleveland. In the redrawing process, Fudge's district was left comfortably Democratic.

While Williams called the overall map "an insult to the citizens of Ohio," she said she supported how it preserved the minority population in Fudge's district and how it would give minority candidates another opportunity to have a seat in Congress.

"I think it's far past the time for there to be more than one minority person in the state of Ohio, especially based on population," Williams said.

"Whatever the boundaries are, my priorities remain the same. I intend to listen and to be a voice for the people of my district. The hard working families of Northeast Ohio, our elderly and our children deserve the best service and highest quality of life," said Congresswoman Marcia Fudge.

The new map would have Clinton County become part of the 2nd District represented by U.S. Rep. Jean Schmidt, a Republican from Clermont County. Presently, Clinton County is within Ohio's 3rd Congressional District which is represented in the U.S. House of Representatives by U.S. Rep. Mike Turner (R-Centerville).

Much of the criticism over the map in the Republican-controlled House came from Democrats, who claimed the proposal was written behind closed doors with little opportunity for input from them or the public once the map was released at a Tuesday hearing.

The map would force six incumbents to vie for three seats, leading to face-offs between Republicans Mike Turner and Steve Austria in southern Ohio, and Democrats Dennis Kucinich and Marcy Kaptur for a district along the Lake Erie shore. It would also squeeze Democratic U.S. Rep. Betty Sutton into the district of Republican Jim Renacci.

The map includes one district that stretches from Toledo to Cleveland. Another crescent-shaped district in central Ohio held by Republican Steve Stivers touches parts of 13 counties from Appalachia to Amish country.

Chris Redfern, the chairman of Ohio's Democratic Party, said the map does not ensure that another minority candidate could win the Columbus-area seat because primary battles could knock them out of the contest.

The party is considering whether it would launch a ballot repeal effort of the proposed map, should it become law. Redfern said they were also looking at ways to challenge the map's legality. "We are prepared to use every tool at our disposal to fight this unfair, anti-voter congressional map," he said.

Senate Democrats are discussing whether to introduce their own map in that chamber, though it would be unlikely to get much traction. Republicans hold a 23-10 edge there.

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An elections bill that also cleared the House on Thursday would move the primary date to May, though it wouldn't immediately take effect. Democrats had earlier backed out of a deal to support the switch, protesting what they say is a rushed timeline for remapping the state's U.S. House districts.

Minority Leader Armond Budish said that Democratic support for the immediate primary move, which requires seven Democrats to pass, was contingent on extra time being given for the public to review the GOP-drawn map.

Firing a letter to the House Speaker Republican William Batchelder, Buddish said he had deep concern about the lack of transparency and public input and also threatening to rescind his word of working with him to move back the Primary Election from March to May.

The Legislature previously OK'd the primary move in June as part of an elections overhaul that is now subject to a ballot repeal effort.