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The state's redistricting process is now fully underway and, as Senate Chairman of the Special Joint Committee on Redistricting, I want to remind everyone that public participation in this effort is encouraged and greatly desired by me and my committee colleagues.

Toward that end, the committee has established an interactive website – www.malegislature.gov/redistricting – that we believe will give the citizens of the Commonwealth access to the kind of information they will need to be full participants in the redrawing of our Congressional districts and the districts for seats in the Massachusetts House of Representatives and the Massachusetts Senate. Historical documents, maps, a search engine that enables the public to find their current districts, links to U.S. Census data, and information on the laws governing the redistricting process are just a few of the items that can be found on this website.

In addition, the website's "Contact the Committee" feature allows the public to submit questions, comments and documents to committee members, thereby ensuring that the public's voice will be heard throughout the entire process. A calendar of all upcoming public hearings -- an unprecedented 13 have been scheduled thus far -- and meetings scheduled throughout the spring and into the summer is also available on the website. Two more public hearings will be held in western Massachusetts: one at Greenfield Community College on Tuesday, May 31st, beginning at 6 p.m. and the second on Saturday, June 11th at Pittsfield Town Hall beginning at 10 a.m.

My committee colleagues and I agree that public participation is vital to this process.

On paper, the Redistricting Committee's task looks relatively simple: We must draw a map that leaves each of the state's 40 senators with a district of about 164,000 people; each of the state's 160 representatives with a district of about 41,000 people; and nine Congressional districts each with as close to 727,514 people as reasonably possible. All this must be done in time for the 2012 elections.

It may sound simple, but this time the process is complicated by the fact that Massachusetts is not growing as quickly as other parts of the nation and therefore must lose one of its 10 Congressional seats. The committee will work hard to configure districts in such a way so that voters will have a fair opportunity to elect Congressional and state representatives and state senators of their choice. There are also constitutional requirements, federal and state court rulings, and the Voting Rights Act that dictate how districts can be created. The process must also address local and regional interests, information that committee members might not have unless the citizens of the Commonwealth join us in a spirit of partnership. No one, not even those of us on the committee, can say at this early stage how the nine new Congressional districts will be redrawn.

When the members of the Legislature chose to have redistricting performed by a legislative committee, instead of a so-called independent commission, we opted to keep it in the hands of people who are held accountable by the political process every two years. If voters are dissatisfied with our results, it will show at the polls, a powerful incentive to do our job well. An independent commission, however, whose members would have been appointed by elected officials, would not have negated the political nature of redistricting, merely removed from voters the power to express directly any displeasure with an unsatisfactory result.

Independent does not necessarily mean freedom from partiality, or freedom from political influence. Nor does an independent commission necessarily mean a better map.

According to information provided by the National Conference of State Legislatures, of the 13 independent commissions in 2000 that were responsible for drawing the initial map for their states, nine, or 69 percent, were challenged in court.

Legislative committees, on the other hand, fared better. Of the 37 state legislative committees, 19, or 51 percent, were challenged in court.

It's important to note that the plan crafted by the Massachusetts Senate in 2000, when I also served as committee chairman, was not challenged in court. In fact, documents submitted to the Massachusetts Federal District Court held up the Senate's process as an example of how to reach out effectively to the public and incorporate disparate voices.

Redistricting is a complicated process, and as long as human beings are in charge, whether as members of a legislative committee or an outside commission, it will be an imperfect process. A flawless result cannot be guaranteed by anyone. But what is guaranteed is that an outside commission would remove from the process the countervailing force of direct voter scrutiny, something my colleagues and I, as elected public servants, understand very well and feel every day.

Direct accountability and direct access: This is what the Legislature's Special Joint Committee on Redistricting is working hard to achieve. My colleagues and I encourage everyone to learn about the process and share their thoughts with us.

State Senator Stan Rosenberg (D-Amherst) is President Pro Tem of the Massachusetts Senate and Senate Chairman of the Special Joint Committee on Redistricting