

## REGIONAL VIEW

# Wrong interests get put first in gerrymandering

*Fayetteville Observer Editorial*

There are plenty of reasons why gerrymandering is a bad practice, but this is the one that underlies the rest: When political district lines are drawn, politicians' interests come first and the voters' interests are at best a distant second.

The state Senate redistricting plan did a pretty decent job of compacting Democratic Sen. Ben Clark's District 21, which includes all of Hoke County and part of Cumberland. As drawn now, the Cumberland portion is a bizarre set of tentacles that snake into many neighborhoods. The tentacles are surrounded by Republican Sen. Wesley Meredith's District 19. The final version of the redrawn map turned the tentacles into a sensible, fairly solid block.

But then Clark sought an accommodation from his Republican colleagues. He's building a second home in eastern Cumberland County, near I-95. His home has been in eastern Hoke County. The I-95 location would make for a much easier trip to Raleigh. Even though he's in the minority party and a frequent vocal critic of Republican redistricting, his fellow lawmakers were quick to accommodate his wishes, drawing a "peninsula" out of the nice, compact district across Meredith's District 19 to Clark's new home. The Senate redistricting committee said it would affect about 300 voters, moving them from Meredith's district to Clark's. But federal census data shows that more than 1,000 people are affected.

The bottom line: A senator's convenience — even if he's a member of the opposite party — is more important to our lawmakers than drawing tight, reasonable legislative districts.

It's simply a way of doing business that's long been ingrained in our legislative institutions, no matter which party is in control. Redistricting isn't done to serve the voters. It's all about helping lawmakers get what they want, which is mostly getting re-elected and sometimes as mundane as letting a senator stay in his district after he builds a house that's outside of it.

The only way we're going to have electoral districts that serve the voters first is to create the nonpartisan, independent redistricting commission that most lawmakers support until their party takes control.

The new maps are heading back for review by the three-judge federal panel that found the current maps to be illegal racial gerrymandering. If the new maps are not approved, it's possible that the federal court will end up drawing the maps. That would create more political ferment and might also spell the end of the not-yet-renowned Clark Peninsula.

But maybe for once, the voters' interests would come first.