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Contest sparks debate over shape of 4th Congressional District

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Ohio's 4th Congressional District includes 11 counties and meanders from Richland nearly to the state's western border.

The boundaries would be much different if some political reformers have their say. The results of a statewide competition to redraw congressional district maps were released last week. The League of Women Voters, Ohio Citizen Action and Common Cause Ohio were among the competition's sponsors.

Criteria included compacting districts, reflecting regional similarities and making congressional races as politically competitive as possible. Where Richland County could be found on the three winning maps:

One shows Richland on the northwest side of a seven-county district, dominating it in population. Mansfield, Medina, Wooster and Mount Vernon would be that district's largest cities.

On a second map, Delaware County would be the center of population for an eight-county district that includes Delaware, Mansfield, Newark and Marion.

The third featured Richland County in a central location surrounded by portions of 12 counties. Mansfield, Marion, Mount Vernon, Coshocton, Marysville and Bellefontaine all would be part of the district.

Congressional districts are redrawn by the Ohio General Assembly after each census, with no rules or criteria to meet other than federal case law. State legislative districts are drawn by a board made up of the governor, secretary of state, state auditor, one legislative Democrat and one legislative Republican.

At-Large Councilwoman Ellen Haring said the contest "could warrant some very interesting community conversations."

The current 4th District "covers a very wide swath, with Mansfield being the largest city -- and cities far to the west like **Lima** and Findlay, not seeming to have much in common," she said.

Haring said the three maps that won top place in the state competition all scored high on compactness, competitiveness and fairness, so it seemed important to consider which best reflects community preservation. "Would Richland County have more in common with neighbors who are more concentrated in the north, south, east or west?"

The councilwoman said she favored the map that placed Delaware and Mansfield in one district.

"Doesn't it make sense to have our (state) legislative and Congressional districts overlap, if possible?" Haring said. "We could benefit by more interaction and linkage with Delaware, a fast-growing city with the lowest unemployment in the state."

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Richland County Republican Party Chairman Mark Arnold wasn't keen on changing the current 4th District boundaries, saying they make sense as a unified area.

"Our legislators have served our areas well by having a presence with Mansfield and Richland County offices. Both Congressman (Michael) Oxley and Congressman (Jim) Jordan have and continue to have offices staffed with local representatives," he said. "Redistricting is a political process and I support the current methodology. Voters can make their voices heard by voting on those who hold the strings of the process."

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