

## County tosses district question to committee

**By Billy Ball**

**Jan 14, 2009**

MONROE - Union County commissioners want an advisory committee to study whether the Board of Commissioners should continue to be elected at large or by districts.

The board spent two hours Tuesday debating whether and how to create a panel to study the controversial issue; after the study, the commissioners said, residents could decide the issue with a referendum in 2010.

Commissioners disagree on whether county voting districts are needed to ensure equal representation among Union County's municipalities and regions on the Board of Commissioners.

A majority say it's unfair to call for one commissioner per geographic district when the bulk of the population lives in western towns. Others, like Commissioners Parker Mills and Allan Baucom, say eastern residents will go without a voice otherwise.

Four of five commissioners live in the western region.

"I'm comfortable with what's been presented," said Baucom, who asked state legislators to help the commissioners create district representation and expand the number of commissioners. Incoming Commissioners Tracey Kuehler and Kim Rogers got a boost from the backlash of western voters who said any decision about districts should be made locally, and not in Raleigh. In 2007, a referendum calling for district representation and a seven-member board was resoundingly defeated.

Tuesday's committee proposal, written by Kuehler, a western resident and districts opponent, included members from each of the county's 14 municipalities, five members representing unincorporated areas, a non-voting commissioner as chairman and a minority representative who might or might not speak for a town.

The panel will meet in monthly sessions, allotting time for public comment, Kuehler said.

Commissioners are also considering whether five members for unincorporated regions is sufficient to speak for those in Union County who live outside of towns and villages.

"It's a large board as it is," board Chairman Lanny Openshaw warned.

Kuehler said a 2010 referendum would be best to avoid the added expense of posing the question in a non-voting year like this year.

"That's on the assumption (the committee) comes back with any changes," Rogers said.

The board is expected to vote on the committee at Tuesday's 7 p.m. session at the Union County Government Center.

Commissioners typically would meet Monday, but that is the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday.

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