

January 15, 2022

Independent Redistricting Commission
250 Broadway, 22nd Floor
New York, NY 10007

Dear Chairman Imamura, Vice Chairman Martins, Members of the Commission, and Co-Executive Directors Blatt and Breakell,

I am writing to you today to share Scenic Hudson's perspective on the recently proposed Congressional District and State Legislative maps drafted by the New York State Independent Redistricting Commission. As you are aware, there are active discussion that propose reorganization of the electoral map in the Hudson Valley.

Scenic Hudson preserves land and farms and creates parks that connect people with the inspirational power of the Hudson River, while fighting threats to the river and climate change. Our work brings together people and organizations to protect the natural resources at the heart of the Hudson Valley's health and prosperity. Founded in 1963, we are the largest environmental organization addressing the needs of our region.

The Hudson Valley is home to several major social and ecological communities that share unique identities and are worthy of consistent, focused attention by US Congress and the NY State Legislature. Scenic Hudson is concerned by proposals that would unduly complicate representation and management of the region's environment and natural resource based economy, and challenge our collective ability to address climate change and organize federal and state support to help achieve the goals of New York State's Climate Leadership and Community Protection Act, including its environmental justice policy.

Scenic Hudson strongly recommends that the current Congressional Districts NY-20, NY-19, NY-18, and NY-17, generally speaking, be drawn in a manner to retain most of the communities that they currently represent. We believe that there is a special case to be made for why Ulster County should remain in a single Congressional District. We further propose, as we have in previous redistricting efforts, that districts throughout the region cross the Hudson River to ensure that our waterfront community's identities continue to be recognized for the critical role they play in New York's environment and our Nation's economy.

NY Congressional District 20

The ecological character of the current NY-20 Congressional District is defined by the confluence of the upper Hudson and Mohawk Rivers with the Hudson River Estuary. This region is united by unique challenges, including reversing harm from decades of damage caused by water management infrastructure that opened new opportunities for our nation's commerce, yet

is now increasingly being understood as contributing to invasive species management challenges and flooding of local communities, including state-mapped Environmental Justice Areas. Uniform representation of this area of the Hudson Valley is essential to address these and other issues.

NY Congressional District 19

The Catskills, Hudson Valley and Taconic region – notably Ulster County and waterfront communities in Columbia and Dutchess Counties – share unique environmental challenges that must be represented uniformly in Congress. These issues include species and habitat migration due to climate change, flood control, sea level rise adaptation in coastal communities, and drinking water infrastructure for New York City. In addition, the region has a robust agricultural economy that defines the rural landscape. Farms in this region, on average, are less than half the acreage of the state’s average size farm, trend towards producing specialized products for the New York City market, and include a great number of farmers that are employing climate resilient and regenerative techniques.

Ulster County, in particular, is at the forefront of these issues, and it must not be bifurcated on future Congressional maps. Further, its social and economic connectivity with Columbia and Dutchess County waterfront communities, made possible by the Rip Van Winkle, Kingston-Rhinecliff, and Mid-Hudson Bridges would benefit from uniform representation. This area of the Hudson River has been significantly impacted by generations of industrialization. As a result, it contains many opportunities to reduce harmful chemical contaminants such as PCBs, restore critical habitats, promote equitable public access to the Hudson River, and implement local plans for sea level rise and climate resilience. The Cities of Hudson, Kingston and other population centers are also home to many frontline communities mapped as Environmental Justice Areas by New York State. Focused attention on these disadvantaged communities is necessary to unlock their potential and created new opportunities for their residents to address social justice and economic development issues.

Because of the connectivity of these issues and the region’s unique demographics, Scenic Hudson strongly recommends that Ulster County be contained wholly within its future Congressional District, and that the district also include other waterfront communities in Dutchess and Columbia Counties.

NY Congressional District 18 and overlapping State Senate Districts

The current Congressional District is defined by the Hudson Highlands, the portion of the Appalachian Mountain chain that runs through New York State. The region has been extensively studied by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is home to nationally significant watersheds, wildlife habitats, and farmland and forest systems. These natural resources are recognized for their federal significance in the Highlands Conservation Act. From an environmental prospective, the ability of the Hudson Valley and its Hudson Highlands sub-region to continue to provide clean water benefits to the Croton Aqueduct system and recreational opportunities for the regions residents and visitors from New York City, requires consistent and uniform representation in Congress.

We apply this same logic to current State Senate District 39, and request that it be redrawn to

include the Hudson Highlands, a major natural resource of interest to the State of New York that is included in the State Open Space Conservation Plan. It is also the proposed site of state and nationally significant infrastructure and public access amenities, including the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail, and the Appalachian Trail. Analogous to our analysis of the 19th Congressional District, the Cities of Beacon and Newburgh share much in common, and a strong economic and social connection through the Newburgh-Beacon Bridge, a ferry service, waterfront parks, and the challenges and opportunities faced by small cities in the region. As such, they would benefit by representation in the same State Senate District.

NY Congressional Districts 17 and 16

The suburban areas of Westchester and Rockland Counties are united by their proximity to the Hudson River and major transportation infrastructure, including the Tappan Zee Bridge/Mario Cuomo Bridge, a critical connection for commerce, motorists, bicyclists and pedestrians. In this region, Scenic Hudson believes that Congressional maps must be drawn to further position the Hudson as an economic and environmental resource that attracts new visitors and facilitates the recovery of natural resources by federal agencies. Management of oyster reefs and habitat for other critical water-dependent species, through dam removal, daylighting of historically buried tributaries, and other means, and managing sea level rise and flooding in these waterfront and near-shore communities, requires coordinated federal action and uniform representation in Congress. These initiatives will benefit from stronger representation if future Congressional Districts cross the river between the two counties.

Conclusion

As history has demonstrated, the Hudson Valley, because of its geography and rich environmental resources, will continue to be influential to New York State's and our Nation's prosperity. The economy and environment are closely linked in this region, and it is critical that future Congressional maps represent this connectivity and prioritize it to ensure that the region's communities receive sufficient Congressional attention to secure this promise.

Thank you for considering Scenic Hudson's comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Andy Bicking". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Andy Bicking
Director of Government Relations and Public Policy

Cc:

Assembly Speaker Carl Heastie

Assembly Minority Leader Will Barclay

President Pro Tempore and Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins

Senate Minority Leader Robert Ort