



Wednesday, May 8, 2026

Dear Members of the Senate & Governmental Affairs Committee:

There were some truly bizarre moments in the multi-year effort of litigation and advocacy that culminated in the drawing of the new Sixth Congressional District that extends from Baton Rouge through Lafayette to Shreveport. These moments crystallized in a Fifth Circuit's judge's exclamation that redistricting "just couldn't carve up Lafayette" and a notable footnote in one of the many documents filed in the case celebrating the centrality of "Cajun culture" in the region. As that line of argumentation would have it, Southwest Louisiana, particularly the Acadiana region, is just one big, happy, francophone, festival-going family. But as is the case with so many communities and forms of political, social, and cultural organization, the truth is not that simple. While there are many unifying features of our region, there are many others that, while rooted in past racial divisions that have continued into the present and are integrally involved with the future of the City of Lafayette, Lafayette Parish and many other similarly situated cities, towns, and villages in the Acadiana region and Southwest Louisiana.

The Louisiana and Lafayette Leagues' Engagement on Redistricting

In the context of the ongoing congressional redistricting process that began in 2022, the situation on the Northside of Lafayette city and parish has presented a particular challenge for the League of Women Voters of Louisiana (LWVLA) and particularly its local chapter, the League of Women Voters of Lafayette (LWVLFT). Simply put, most of the Voting Rights Act-compliant maps offered by our statewide voting rights coalition partners involved the severing, to different degrees, portions of the Northeast part of Lafayette Parish. This is the region known as the Northside or North Lafayette. Could LWVLA and LWVLFT endorse maps that so obviously severed a parish known to be predominantly Black? Would it be acceptable for a parish as geographically compact (though with significant population) to be represented by two congressional representatives? What would it mean for us to support maps that reified painful historical divisions that seemed to correspond to race? Were there factors in the present that would support such a division for reasons that transcend race alone?

In its 2022 statement on redistricting, reflecting broad discussion and support within the league, we concluded that there were such factors and, specifically, that "we support the possibility of communities of interest in our parish having greater opportunity to elect representatives who represent their interests and envision ways in which having more diverse congressional representation for our parish can benefit the entire parish and region." Our conclusion in support of maps that might divide Lafayette was based on our discussions of the number of ways that the Northside of Lafayette city and parish is a distinct community of interest based not merely on race but a range of divisions that separate it apart from the rest of

the city and parish as having distinct needs that make it a real community of interest—not in the sense of past history, but very real and present-day issues that are likely to significantly shape its future. The next section sets forth the various factors that make the Northside of Lafayette a very distinctive community in its parish, and which align it with its northern and eastern neighbors.

Past and Present Issues Facing North Lafayette

Transportation. A longstanding issue that has re-emerged in recent years has to do with the I-49 Connector, an elevated highway that will connect I-49 south of Lafayette to the portion that exists north of Lafayette in Opelousas. The project was broached in the 1980s but was stalled for decades. The project has always raised uncomfortable optics of dividing a city along historical redline districts at a time when many urban areas (such as New Orleans with Claiborne Avenue) have been questioning and rethinking urban divisive highways. The proposed overpass presents environmental threats to the Chicot Aquifer from old railroad infrastructure that runs immediately adjacent to the proposed elevated highway. While penetration of the aquifer with heavy metals and other pollution would threaten the entire region, it would likely have its most acute effects on the Northside communities that surround it. Discussion of the I-49 Connector went dormant again from about 2015 on, but it has resurged again with a new mayor-president in Lafayette pushing the project forward, among other reasons to facilitate economic development, such as the large First Solar factory, south of Lafayette in New Iberia. The project seems to be going forward with questions still being asked about environmental impact and its physical, economic, and cultural effects on the surrounding neighborhoods. The elevated highway would be a very physical separation of the Northside from the rest of the parish and involves a range of economic, environmental, and cultural factors that involve, but are not exclusively about race. The effects of the failure to move forward with the I-49 Connector for decades have created significant economic obstacles to the Northeast region's development for decades, as businesses have not been able to establish themselves there, and indeed have pulled out of the area over the ongoing uncertainty about the project. This physical separation of North Lafayette by a large, elevated highway would seem itself to be a significant geographical barrier, reinforced by a roadway, that could be a reason to treat the community separately from the rest of Lafayette.

Libraries. Another recent issue that reinforces the Northside of Lafayette as a distinct community of interest is its dearth of library resources and the recent battles to secure a Northeast Regional Library. Over the last two decades, Lafayette's main library was remodeled, and new branches were constructed in the East, South, West, and North (really northwest, in Carencro) parts of the parish. These are vital facilities that offer a range of educational, cultural, recreational, and technological resources to the communities that surround them. The only part of the parish that did not get a new library was the Northeast region—the very part of the parish that will not be separated from the rest of the parish by the I-49 Connector. Funding for the new library was approved in 2018, but the Library Board did not formally vote to acquire land for the new library until 2023, at greater cost which required the physical downsizing of the proposed facility. Many on the Northside eagerly anticipate the new library's construction—but as they say, the proof's in the pudding. Many of us will not have full faith in the Northeast Regional Library project until we walk through its doors. (It should be noted that in addition to slow-walking the construction of the new library, the current Library Board has fostered divisive policies, such as prohibiting groups about groups in the community and striking “cultural” and

“recreational” programs from the library’s mission. The Cajun French tables celebrated in court filings celebrating Cajun culture might be able to meet at the library, but they probably couldn’t erect a cultural display there. More on recreation and culture will be said below.)

Education. One of the most recent issues facing the Northside community has to do with educational resources. Very controversially and with considerable community outcry, the Lafayette School Board voted to move gifted-and-talented and language-immersion programs from Paul Breaux Middle School, which is in the Northeast region, to schools in the South and West of the parish. They are said to have moved these programs literally across town as preparation to close Paul Breaux and convert the building to a warehouse for the parish school system. A large part of the controversy around the gutting and projected closure of Paul Break is its status as a historically Black school. For many years, it was a high school, and the only one that Black students could attend, so it is cherished by many of the community for those historical reasons. But with the gifted and talented and language-immersion programs, it has functioned as a magnet school for many years, attracting a diverse student body of students from throughout the parish. The future now seems bleak for Paul Breaux in a way that has upset people throughout the parish. But with an elevated highway coming through and a library not yet constructed, the gutting and projected closure of Paul Breaux is creating a community of interest around further diminution of resources—in this case, educational resources, in the Northeast region of the parish.

Parks. Educational institutions are not the only resources to go missing in Lafayette’s Northside in recent years. Our immediate past mayor-president, Josh Guillory, surprised the Northside on a recent morning by razing one if its community parks, Brown Park, under cover of darkness as the rays of dawn were just beginning to color the skies. The shocked residents convened many meetings once the bulldozers left. The promise from the then-mayor-president was that a state-of-the-art sports facility would be constructed, and ground was even broken to that end and the park closed for a time. But the facility never appeared, and our new mayor-president, Monique Boulet, has since had to allocate funding to repair the grounds, and to scale back the originally promised facility. As a result, there has been considerable community of interest around access to parks on Lafayette’s Northside in the last few years.

Recreation. The problems with parks and recreation did not start with Brown Park and the poor regard for “culture” and “recreation” on the Northside did not originate with the Library Board. One of former mayor-president Josh Guillory’s first initiatives was to threaten to close four recreation centers on the Northside. The parks and recreation director, state Senator Gerald Boudreaux resigned, and other staff were placed on leave. Various schemes to privatize the recreation centers were broached, but none succeeded. Ultimately, the decision was taken to keep the recreation centers open, but not before creating a considerable community of interest around access to recreation facilities. Further, with regard to the controversy over the Northeast Library mentioned above, it is worth noting that Northside community members who have provided the library board commission tasked with constructing the new library with feedback on the new library have indicated that recreational and cultural offerings, in addition to books, materials, and internet access are strong interests of their community. Thus, with respect to both recreation centers and recreational opportunities, there is a strong community of interest on the Northside to secure access to recreation facilities that benefit their communities.

Development. The Northeast part of the parish has for years been included in a government entity known as the North Lafayette Redevelopment Authority (NLRA). The NLRA is said to have faced problems of mismanagement and inaction in recent years. This year, Senator Gerald Boudreaux introduced a bill to disband the NLRA and to fold its work into the Lafayette Economic Development Authority (LEDA). The bill has been questioned by members of the community, though it seems to be making its way through the legislature. It is likely that there will be lingering questions around the demise of the NLRA, both how it was allowed to waste resources and languish, and whether North Lafayette's distinctive redevelopment needs will be adequately addressed by LEDA. These concerns are magnified by the ongoing uncertainty over the I-49 Connector and create a distinct community of interest on the Northside over how to secure some of the development that other parts of the parish have enjoyed.

Culture. Finally, we get to the great questions of culture—matters that have occupied many a brief in the redistricting process, but which are, arguably, less significant than many if not all the aforementioned factors for the Northside of Lafayette. In particular, the Cajun celebratory footnotes and fillings in the ongoing redistricting saga make much of Acadiana and Southwest Louisiana's distinctive Cajun French culture, but the ignores the reality of the diversity of cultures in the region and the history (and the present, as the aforementioned factors should suggest) of marginalization and subordination of the residents of Lafayette's Northside regions that might be affected by proposed redistricting. First, Southwest Louisiana and the Acadiana region include people of diverse heritage, including Native Louisianans, French, Spanish, British, German, Czech, Lebanese, Syrian, and other groups—not to mention the descendants of formerly enslaved (Black) African Americans, who still constitute the majority population on Lafayette Parish's Northside. Many African American on the Northside have French names, but many of those names come from the families of those who enslaved them. The African American Northside of Lafayette includes distinctive soul food and zydeco music traditions that are different from the Cajun and country and western music preferences of the southern parts of the parish. This isn't to say that African Americans cannot do country and western—as we have recently seen in the artist Beyoncé forays into the country music world, drawing on the distinctive Black Cowboy culture that North Lafayette shares with St. Landry and parishes to the North. There are African American Catholics on Lafayette's Northside, but the more numerous churches are of the Protestant and Pentecostal black church tradition. While French Catholics may dominate Lafayette Parish overall, they are not the predominant groups on the Northside—which in culture and religion, as in so many other areas, is a community apart. Perhaps the clearest exemplification of this has been discussion in recent years of the City of Lafayette flag, whose castle, fleur de lis, and gold star hearken back to Spanish, French, and Acadian settlers, but which does not take into account the cultural contributions of indigenous peoples—much less formerly enslaved African Americans. There have been concerns expressed about the cultural hegemony of the Ragin Cajun culture that began as an advertising campaign, but one which now may not convey the full flavor of the region.

The Importance of Voting Rights and Court Remedies for Lafayette and Louisiana

What can we conclude from this examination of the issues that animate and consternate the Northeast portion of Lafayette Parish that might be affected by proposed redistricting maps? Above all, we can say that the Northside is a distinctive community of interest that comes

together around not hoary bonds of history or caricatures of culture. It is a region with interests that separate it from its parish and from many other areas of Acadiana and Southwest Louisiana.

The Northside has very distinct and specific concerns around infrastructure of **transportation** and **development**. How that infrastructure and development unfold in ways that connect it to St. Landry and Iberia Parishes in the north and south, respectively, could be heavily impacted by access to federal funding that could come from a congressional representative who represents their interests. These interests make the Northside of Lafayette very different from Acadia or Jeff Davis parishes to the west, not to mention the emerging LNG based corridor in Calcasieu and Cameron. The Northside is much more tied to St. Landry and parts of Iberia as well as to the I-10 transportation corridor to Baton Rouge.

The Northside also has distinctive **library** and **educational** concerns. These are largely state matters, but they are ones where the region either has been underserved (libraries) or risks being underserved (education). If there is federal money that could help in either area, say by providing internet access to the area so that it can participate remotely in educational offerings elsewhere in the parish remotely or be able to access other offerings online. These are matters where the Northside might have very distinctive issues from the rest of Lafayette Parish. In some maps that would place the Northside of Lafayette with the rural, northern Delta parishes, it is quite conceivable that community of interest could exist around issues of broadband access and other educational resources.

The Northside has **parks** and **recreation** concerns. Like libraries and education, these are areas where the Northside of Lafayette has suffered deficits. These affect the Northside communities themselves, but they could also be a site of economic development. Particularly with Louisiana sports culture, there could be benefit in more facilities in the northern part of the parish that would also be accessible to Northeast Louisiana residents coming down US-167 as well as communities to the east along I-10 and toward Baton Rouge. There have already been transportation improvements along I-10 to the east of Lafayette. If the I-49 Connector does what it says it does, the I-10/I-49 juncture could become an economic driver for the northern part of the parish and the state. Parks and recreation in the area, perhaps with some federal grants, could be an area in which Northside residents would benefit from effective representation.

Finally, on the matter of **culture**, while vibrant cultures are always evolving, “culture” for purposes of the recent redistricting debates has largely been a fixation on the past. There’s a problematic past on the Northside of Lafayette, but there is also a real possibility of a vibrant future. The residents of the Northeast region of Lafayette parish, would benefit from opportunities not only to advocate on behalf of their own community of interest in the parish, but to form alliances with other communities in the north and east—rural parishes in need of development in the Delta region, transportation hubs along I-49 and I-10, communities concerned about libraries and public education (Lafayette has lately been looking east to Livingston Parish library kerfuffle and East Baton Rouge public schools with the secession of St. George). Indeed, while taking no position on the recent establishment of St. George, if a political system can allow a community of interest such as St. George to chart its own way, why should a community of interest in North Lafayette parish, deprived of local resources, but potentially ripe for development with an infusion of federal funds not be allowed to choose a congressional representative to represent their interests.

Conclusion

Above all, and in conclusion, the factors that distinguish North Lafayette are predominantly racial and by no means historical—they are real, concrete, and not limited to the past, but also crucially about the present and future of the Lafayette region. Lafayette, recently noted to be the fastest growing parish in Louisiana, now benefits greatly from being under the eyes of not one but two congressional representatives.

Representative Cleo Fields has held several public town halls in Lafayette, since 2024, when the area's other representative Clay Higgins limits himself to private and generally partisan venues or telephone town halls. The new attention and engagement of North Lafayette is a result of the voting rights litigation and advocacy that has been made possible by the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the crucial opportunities that it has afforded plaintiffs to defend their rights and challenge patterns of racial discrimination that are still very much with us today.

Given the ongoing uncertainties around the Voting Rights Act, particularly Section 2 remedies, at the federal level, we need the Louisiana Voting Rights Act to ensure that Louisiana voters in every community are able to defend their voting rights and their ability, in a representative democracy, to choose representatives and elected officials who can effectively represent their interests, particularly in overcoming concrete dimensions of racial discrimination that are not purely historical, but persistent and ongoing in nature. As the novelist William Faulkner wrote, "The past is not dead. In fact, it's not even past." Nowhere is this truer than in voting rights in Louisiana.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "M. Christian Green". The script is cursive and fluid, with a stylized "M" and "G".

M. Christian Green
President, League of Women Voters of Louisiana
Leadership Team, League of Women Voters of Lafayette

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LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF LAFAYETTE
2022 POSITION ON REDISTRICTING

The League of Women Voters of Lafayette supports the decision of the League of Women Voters of Louisiana to sign letters of support by a coalition of national and statewide voting rights organizations calling for: (1) the creation of a second majority-majority congressional district in Louisiana, (2) the creation of a third majority-minority district on the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, and (3) that state legislative redistricting be done in a way to give voters of color a greater chance at equal representation and more seats in our legislature. We deem these measures necessary to fulfill the requirements of Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

We understand that the creation of the second majority-minority congressional district, under the maps that have been proposed, will likely result in Lafayette Parish being represented by two or possibly three congressional representatives. However, we support the possibility of communities of interest in our parish having greater opportunity to elect representatives who represent their interests and envision ways in which having more diverse congressional representation for our parish can benefit the entire parish and region.

Relatedly, we call on our City and Parish councils to draw new maps in ways that preserve existing majority-minority districts on both councils. We are aware that some Census reports show a reduced number of Black voters, in particular, on the City's Northside, but the same reports are also said to show a greater percentage of the Northside population identifying themselves as more than one race. All this attests to the growing diversity of our region and the importance of ensuring equal and diverse representation.



LWVLA POSITIONS ON REDISTRICTING 2022

The League of Women Voters of Louisiana (LWVLA) is a non-partisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government. It has over 300 members in local leagues and units in Orleans, St. Tammany, East Baton Rouge, Lafayette, Natchitoches and Caddo-Bossier parishes. LWVLA influences public policy through education and advocacy. For the past two years, LWVLA has sponsored educational meetings and webinars on redistricting, often in collaboration with other organizations. These events informed voters on the state and federal constitutional requirements for redistricting and explained the process whereby the plans to redraw Louisiana's voting districts will be prepared. Since the process of redistricting is to begin with the upcoming Special Session of the Louisiana State Legislature, it is now time for the LWVLA to turn from educating to advocating for those policies which it considers crucial to the generation of fair voting district maps.

In addition to the minimally acceptable criteria adopted in the 2021 Regular Session HCR 90, the LWVLA supports the following redistricting policies.

When the Special Session of the State Legislature meets:

- All proposed maps should be available to the public as they are developed.
- Meetings should be open to public testimony.
- To ensure maximum public participation, virtual public testimony should be allowed.

Draw district maps to achieve proportional representation of minorities

- Of the six Congressional districts, two should be majority-minority.
- Of the seven Louisiana Supreme Court districts, two should be majority-minority.
- Of the five PSC districts, one should be majority-minority.
- Of the eight BESE districts, three should be majority-minority.

Plans for state representative and senator districts:

- Should not protect incumbency
- Should be politically competitive
- Should adjust districts to give added representation to areas that have had the greatest population growth
- Should respect communities with common cultural, economic and geographic interests:
 - Avoid dividing communities of interest among multiple districts
 - Avoid districts that are composed of an excessive number of parishes
 - Avoid districts that are primarily one parish with just a sliver of another

The LWVLA urges the members of the Senate and Governmental Affairs and House and Governmental Affairs Committees to adopt these policies with the goal of achieving fair maps through the redistricting process.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.

Hilda Walker Thomas, President League of Women Voters of Louisiana