

New map sets stage for battle in 5th District

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Sussex County could be the battleground for New Jersey's most competitive congressional race next year.

Both U.S. Rep. Scott Garrett, a Republican from Wantage, and Democratic Rep. Steve Rothman of Bergen County live within the boundaries of the redrawn 5th Congressional District approved in a 7-6 vote by the New Jersey Redistricting Commission on Friday morning. The district, as before, includes most of Sussex County and parts of Warren, Bergen and Passaic.

It had been evident all week that the commission -- consisting of six Democrats, six Republicans and independent chairman John Farmer Jr. -- was leaning toward putting Garrett and Rothman in the same district. New Jersey is losing a congressional seat starting in Jan. 2013 due to national population shifts and the commission was drafting a new map with 12 districts, instead of 13.

However, Farmer sided with the final map submitted by Republicans, giving Garrett an edge over Rothman based on the voter makeup in the redrawn Fifth. Though Garrett is losing some areas in Republican-dominated Sussex and Warren and getting Democratic-leaning Hackensack, the new Fifth is much closer to its previous version than to the Ninth District currently represented by Rothman.

"This may end up being a district that provides some of the competition that many people advocate ought to be," said John Weingart, associate director of the Eagleton Institute of Politics of Rutgers University.

A Garrett/Rothman showdown would give Sussex County voters a clear choice -- not just between political parties, but between two very different views of government. Garrett is considered among the House's more conservative members, an anomaly in the Northeast, while Rothman is identified with more liberal causes.

"I look forward to continuing my work to create jobs, decrease taxes, and rein in wasteful spending," said Garrett, who has sided at various times in his tenure with the gun lobby, opposed aid for victims of Hurricane Katrina and voted against reauthorizing the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Rothman, elected in 1996, voted for gun control and health care reform and supports allowing openly gay U.S. service members to serve in the military. He serves on the House Appropriations Committee.

"Lines on a map do not change the need to continue the fight to expand opportunity for all Americans get our economy back on track, protect middle class taxpayers, seniors and families, stop those who would end Social Security and Medicare and to keep our beloved nation safe. I look forward to continuing the fight for these values," Rothman said.

Garrett, in a statement issued following the commission's vote, thanked Farmer and said he is looking forward to meeting his new constituents.

"Some of the district's lines may have changed, but my commitment to working to protect the family budget continues. Very important issues have been and will continue to be debated and voted on in Washington on behalf of New Jerseyans," said Garrett, who is in the middle of his fifth term and is vice chairman of the House Budget Committee.

Rothman, by contrast, issued a statement that did not clarify whether -- or where -- he might run for

re-election. The redrawn Eighth District, home to Democratic Rep. Bill Pascrell, includes much of the constituency Rothman currently represents.

Rothman, who lives in Fair Lawn, could run in November 2012 as the Democratic challenger to Garrett -- the scenario suggested Friday by former Assembly Speaker Joseph Roberts Jr., a Democrat -- or he could challenge Pascrell in a Democratic primary next spring.

"My life has been committed to public service and to representing all my constituents," Rothman said, adding, "In pursuit of that fight, I am looking at all my options as a result of the new map."

Farmer, explaining his reasoning in Trenton before the commission voted, said redrawing the Congressional maps had been a grueling process.

"New Jersey is losing a Congressional seat. That alone would make this challenging," he said, adding that the other complicating factor was having to expand the size and scope of the 12 surviving districts.

Farmer said that, in the end, the Republicans simply presented a better map than the Democrats.

He said the new map "exposes two Republican incumbents to a significant risk of losing," in an apparent reference to Garrett and first-term Republican Rep. Jon Runyan of the Third District.

Roberts, who led the six-member Democratic delegation to the commission, disagreed.

"The notion that District 3 is a competitive district, frankly, is a work of fiction," he said.

"The map that is before us today ... has a very significant advantage to Congressman Garrett," Roberts said.

Roberts added that he is optimistic that Rothman would run against Garrett and win but added, "Frankly, this landscape tilts that district against him."

Congressional boundaries in Sussex County were only slightly adjusted by the redistricting commission. The original Fifth District included all of Sussex except for Hopatcong, Byram, Stanhope and about half of Sparta, which fell into the Eleventh District represented by Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen, a Republican from Morris County. The new Eleventh District contains all of Sparta and Ogdensburg, according to a spokesman for Garrett's campaign office.

Garrett also is getting a smaller swath of Warren County. His campaign spokesman, Michael Inanamort, said everything south of Washington Township and White Township was added to the Seventh District of Republican Rep. Leonard Lance.

State Sen. Steve Oroho, R-Sussex, said he was pleased with the outcome.

"I think it's very beneficial for us to have a district where we have a representative who lives nearby," said Oroho, who lives in Franklin.

Ed Selby of Hampton, the losing Democrat candidate against Oroho last November, offered a different take.

"I will give (Garrett) that he is consistent with his own ideology," Selby said, adding, "There's absolutely no way I would vote for Garrett."

