

Redistricting Public Hearing Demands

1. Hold hearings in a diverse and wide array of locations throughout the state.

In 2011, the North Carolina legislature held public hearings at 63 sites across the state. There were a total of 41 hearing sites in 36 counties -- including 24 counties previously covered by Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act.

On September 1, a list of 13 public hearings was released to the public. This means the public will have only 13 opportunities to speak directly to policymakers about how maps should be drawn in 2021.

Shamefully, this list was released to the public before being seen -- much less approved -- by members of the House Committee on Redistricting and Senate Committee on Redistricting and Elections. This lack of transparency is unacceptable.

A new public hearing schedule should be released that includes hearings in every Congressional district of the state. Major population hubs excluded from the proposed hearing schedule -- including Raleigh, Greensboro, and Asheville -- should be added. We urge you to offer the most public hearings possible, and that this list includes previously gerrymandered districts.

2. Schedule hearings both before AND after maps are released to the public.

During the Joint Redistricting Committee meeting on August 18, 2021, Chairman Hise stated that the committee does not plan to hold statewide public hearings after maps are released to the public. Senator Hise's statement is both disappointing and unexpected, as public hearings at 19 locations were held after draft maps were released in 2011.

We call on you to offer a robust public hearing schedule after maps are released to the public. North Carolinians know their communities best and can provide the most useful and important feedback to legislators after viewing draft maps.

3. Provide remote participation for all public hearings for those who are unable to attend in person.

COVID-19 continues to surge across our state. The legislature must respond by offering remote access for all public hearings. These remote options must allow for individuals to meaningfully engage and participate in the same way as those who attend in person. Recent innovations in online meetings have provided the technology to make this possible. Public hearings should be live-streamed to allow for North Carolinians to view in real-time.

North Carolinians who do not have access to a computer or reliable internet access should also be able to fully participate in the public hearing process. Public comments should be accepted by mail and by phone, and the Committee should form a toll-free hotline to allow callers to record their comments.

4. Offer public education about the redistricting process in the lead-up to public hearings.

The North Carolina General Assembly must help residents understand the redistricting process. We cannot expect North Carolinians to meaningfully participate in public hearings if they are unfamiliar with the redistricting process.

To that end, North Carolina must immediately establish a website that includes all redistricting information in one location. Whereas the current redistricting webpage only serves as a warehouse for documents, this site should be accessible, educational, intuitive, and easy to use. States with such websites include Texas, Virginia, and California.

5. Widely advertise public hearings, giving the public enough time to prepare.

Hearings should be advertised in multiple formats, including social media, television, radio, and print publications. An educational element should also be paired with each advertisement, as the term “redistricting” may be unfamiliar to many audiences.

Advertising should be done in media outlets and local forums that serve Black and Brown communities. This should include Spanish-language radio and television stations, as well as other language-specific media outlets that are reflective of the communities where hearings take place.

Lastly, public notices must be released two weeks prior to each meeting. We were disheartened to see the committee give only five days' notice for the first public hearing on redistricting criteria. We implore you to give North Carolinians enough time to learn about public hearings, review documents, and prepare their comments.

6. Prioritize safety and accessibility at all public hearings.

In-person public hearing sites should be accessible by public transport and easily used by people with disabilities. For both in-person and remote attendees, Spanish language and sign language interpretation should be offered and advertised in advance of each hearing.

In light of the recent spike in COVID-19 cases, the Joint Redistricting Committee must provide PPE to all attendees, and both masking and social distancing should be enforced.

7. Hold hearings at times that are convenient to average North Carolinians.

The first public hearing of 2021 was held on a Tuesday morning at 8:30 am -- a time when many North Carolinians were working or caring for their families. All future public hearings should be held in the evenings and on weekends to ensure that all North Carolinians can participate. Childcare should be available to those who have caretaking responsibilities.

8. Make videos and notes of public hearings available online for public viewing.

Testimony given at public hearings should be recorded and accessible via the NCGA redistricting website. Additionally, all public comments made via the online comment portal or hotline should be immediately released to the public.