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Douglas Turner: Silver's dominance blocks UB progress

Douglas Turner

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To call Sheldon Silver an "obstructionist" is like saying that the absolute lord paramount of the Assembly is from Manhattan and a Democrat.

All Assembly Speaker Silver does is stare, deal and block. However, Assemblyman Mark J. F. Schroeder, D-Buffalo, picked an inopportune time to blurt out the truth.

The reason is that Silver is on the threshold of drawing new election district lines for the Assembly, the State Senate and the U. S. Congress. The occasion is the census.

Silver is apt to reward Schroeder's candor with a new Assembly district a mile wide running along the Buffalo River, the lake shore and eastward hugging the Pennsylvania border toward the Delaware River. Schroeder's anger was stirred when Silver broke his word to advance legislation granting the University at Buffalo desperately

needed autonomy from the bureaucrats in Albany. Why Silver is blocking this bill I will tell you below.

Officially, the process of reapportionment starts when the director of the census, Robert Groves, hands the new, 10-year population figures to President Obama on or about New Year's Eve. The census director will also tell Congress exactly how many House seats will go to each state.

New York will get 28, down one from the current level, and down 17 from its 1940s peak. Election Data Services, a firm that states hire to analyze these numbers, made the prediction.

Silver, the governor and the State Senate majority leader will draw the new lines for the House and for the Assembly and State Senate.

The three congressional districts that represent Buffalo Niagara will be expanded south and east as they were in 2002. Incumbents Brian Higgins, D-Buffalo, Louise M. Slaughter, D-Fairport, and Christopher Lee, R-Williamsville, will, like all others, look to Silver and other state leaders to protect their jobs.

This ambition may be eased by the forced retirement of Eric "the tickler" Massa, D-Corning, who represented a sprawling Republican district that stretched from Elmira to Rochester and almost to the mouth of Cattaraugus Creek. My bet is that Lee's new district will move almost entirely out of Erie County.

State redistricting will start officially next April when the census hands state numbers to the state's political leaders and the secretary of state. Ordinarily, congressional incumbents by now would be making huge campaign gifts to people like Silver to smooth the way. However, most have held off this year because of the juicy prospect of setting up soft money committees for this purpose.

The Federal Elections Committee deadlocked over this on Thursday. It will try to agree on Friday.

All these are just more wheels in the machine that safeguards incumbents. Former New York City Mayor Ed Koch has started a noble campaign, endorsed by Attorney General Andrew Cuomo and others, to create a nonpartisan, independent group to do reapportionment instead of the political gang that has been doing it every decade.

For this to happen, Silver would have to cut off his own hands. His vise-like grip on reapportionment is a key to his power. Another is his embrace of public employee union dominance. And this explains why Silver sits on the UB autonomy bill.

While UB's faculty Senate and its students have endorsed it, the union representing the faculty, the American Association of University Professors, does not. Other UB unions have also turned their back on the autonomy and expansion plan. Union leaders have arrangements with SUNY bureaucrats in Albany and Manhattan that they don't want disturbed.

Silver couldn't care less that these links thwart progress and worse, foster mediocrity. That's why the Peoples Republic of New York, under the grip of unlimited public union power, is looking more like stagnant England before Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher threw off socialism's yoke.

dtturner@buffnews.com

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