

# THE DAILY TIMES

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## OUR VIEW

# Fairer election districts ahead

## Bill to remove inmates from redistricting formulas passed

The Maryland House of Delegates and Senate each passed a bill this year in an effort to more fairly draw election districts to

**In summation**  
**Somerset County's minority district has never elected a minority commissioner because inmates, who cannot vote, have been counted as residents and skewed population figures. That will change when a bill passed by the state legislature is signed.**

reflect voting populations. Although the two versions must be reconciled and approved as a single version, this is encouraging news for Somerset County, which has a minority voting district for its County Commissioners that has never managed to elect an African-American

representative. This is because the population of Eastern Correctional Institution is included by the U.S. Census in the overall demographics and population of county residents.  
Including ECI's inmate population when drawing election districts creates problems. It skews the demographics of the district along racial lines; of 3,263 inmates, 74.9

percent are African-American, while the county overall has a 42 percent black population. If inmates voted, perhaps this would not matter so much, but convicted felons are not allowed to cast a ballot. Thus, counting inmates makes the black population of District 1, the court-ordered minority district, seem much higher than it is for voting purposes. Hence, although Somerset County's District 1 was created to comply possible for voters to elect a minority commissioner, this has not happened.

The bills, which would still count those inmates as county residents for purposes of federal aid to the state, would also create a formula that removed these nonvoting inmates from the numbers used to redraw election districts.

Allegations of racial disparity have been raised in the past year by the Somerset County Task Force on Diversity; the American Civil Liberties Union and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People were involved in urging passage of this legislation.

Although it's too late to make district changes before this year's elections — and assuming that these two versions of the bill are reconciled and signed into law — information from the 2010 Census would be used to redraw the county's voting districts before 2012 balloting.

It clearly does not make sense to include prison inmates who are not allowed to participate in the electoral process in the demographics used to draw election districts, in Maryland or anywhere else in the nation. Enacting this long-overdue legislation should be cause for congratulations to Maryland lawmakers.