



Gerrymandering must go!

A basic characteristic of a democracy is free and fair elections where voters choose their representatives. In order to assure representation for a rapidly expanding national population, Congress passed an act in 1929 to empower the legislators in each state to redraw the congressional and state legislative districts so they would each contain the same number of citizens.

Unfortunately, this reform created a conflict of interest – the same people who draw the maps have a strong incentive to create districts that will help them stay in office. And the party in power can gain seats to favor the election of legislators of their party.

This is known as political “gerrymandering,” named after Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry who manipulated the boundaries of the districts so much that one resembled a “salmon.”

Instead of the voters choosing their representatives, the system has been turned upside down and elevated to a science, so that representatives are choosing which voters they want in their districts, using sophisticated databases and technology. And sadly, Pennsylvania is held up as one of the worst examples of this practice.

Gerrymandering has resulted in transformation of nearly every congressional and state legislative district into one designed to protect the incumbent. The effect is that, despite the fact that Congress’ approval rating is less than 20 percent, still 94 percent of incumbents are routinely re-elected.

Fifty years ago the general elections in nearly 100 House seats were considered closely contested. Last year that number was about 30. Incumbents enjoy huge advantages because their districts are drawn so lopsidedly.

And since so many districts are designed to be safe in the fall elections, the real contests have moved to the primaries. Candidates who challenge incumbents in primaries know that the turnout will likely be lower – particularly in non-presidential years. Those who do vote in the primaries tend to be farther to the right or to the left than the general population.

The result of this is that the candidacies also tend to move farther to the margins for fear of losing to challengers accusing them of not being sufficiently conservative or liberal. This has resulted in the disappearance of moderates, who could work to achieve compromises, and has led to extreme partisan divides in Congress and state legislatures.

This can’t go on if our government is to find a way to meet the needs of national security, economic prosperity and a sustaining quality of life. One important way to return our government to the people is to end political gerrymandering. This would help to create more competition in General elections, replace the impact of political extremism and restore the sense of bipartisanship so necessary to a healthy democracy.

In Pennsylvania, this change will require a constitutional amendment, which will take us up to the time of the next census (2020) and the next round of redistricting. Senators Lisa Boscola (D-District 18) and Mario Scavella (R-District 40) have introduced legislation (SB-22) to amend the Constitution to establish an independent commission, not the incumbents or any other political party officials, to re-draw Pennsylvania’s legislative maps.

Senate Bill 22 would establish an 11-member commission comprised of four (non-official holding) individuals registered with the largest political party in the Commonwealth, four (non-official holding) individuals registered with the second largest party and three not affiliated with either major party. The commission would draw congressional and state legislative district maps, equal in population and respecting political subdivisions such as townships and municipalities. Importantly, the commission could not use data regarding personal voting records.

The bill has bipartisan sponsors and supporters, including Common Cause of PA, the League of Women Voters of PA, and Fair Districts PA, but needs the vocal support of voters. Those of us who have devoted many years of our lives to public service believe the time is now

to rise above bitter partisan bickering and get back to solving problems on behalf of the people.

We urge all Pennsylvanians to join us and to contact their state legislators and insist that they **Support SB-22!**

Joe Conti
Pa. General Assembly
1993 – 2006

James K. Coyne
U.S. Congress
1981 – 1983

Mike Fitzpatrick
U.S. Congress
2005 – 2007
2011 – 2016

Carl Fonash
County Commissioner
1980 – 1988

Peg George
Pa. General Assembly
1976 – 1980

Jim Greenwood
U.S. Congress
1993 – 2005

Dave Heckler
Pa. General Assembly
1987 – 1997

Peter Kostmayer
U.S. Congress
1983 – 1993

Charles Meredith
County Commissioner
1966 – 1972

Sandra Miller
County Commissioner
1991 – 2008

Patrick Murphy
U.S. Congress
2007 – 2011

Steve Santarsiero
Pa. General Assembly
2008 – 2016

Mark Schweiker
Pa. Lt. Governor
1995 – 2003

Andy Warren
County Commissioner
1980 – 1995

John T. Harding: Editor’s Revenge Wolfpack at the gate

in the future. Rather than focus on maintaining, modifying and rebuilding his base of support among government officials, this president continues to stress his own rightness, demanding support for whatever he says on no other ground than that he says it.

In short, he has been caught so many times crying wolf when he had widespread support that now when there really are wolves at the White House gate, no amount of yowling will make them go away.

Instead, he is being trapped in a web of lies of his own making. Daily print and broadcast news media reports expose an increas-

ingly wider net of falsehoods he has perpetrated to soothe his ego. And given the choice of whom to believe, journalists or the viral virulence of the president’s defensiveness, political, governmental and congressional leaders are opting out of the “alternative facts” offered by Trumpians and selecting the solid evidence reported in the news media.

Its purpose further states that the First Amendment, bastion of a free democratic republic.

Veteran editor John T. Harding writes on economics, journalism, politics, language and how they interact for the Editor’s Revenge blog.

<http://editorsrevenge.blogspot.com>

54 years ago: Looking into the future

ly be part of this population.

The real fact is that the kind of communities we build during our most secure years will set the pattern for all time and the kind of living these young people will have the rest of their lives.

We have inherited an area justifiably famous for its natural beauty and its liability. And, of course, time doesn’t stop in 1980 or 2010. Those of us living here in Bucks County have a real responsibility to our children and their children as well as to our own enjoyment of life for we are but the custodians of the land we use.

Situated as we are between Philadelphia and New York, the most secure years of our future, and Bucks County can either be a vast monotonous sea of asphalt and shingles or it can be a number of well planned communities surrounded and interlaced with green belts.

But how can these green belts be preserved? How can we make sure that our stream valleys, our mountains, the deep gorges and the magnificent wooded area will continue to delight and refresh the people?

Parks are not primarily structures of concrete, stone, and paving. Parks are basically open green spaces where people can get out and enjoy a change from the pressures of everyday living, where kids can play in a stream, play ball or hike through woods.

But the opportunities are so vast in Bucks that public agencies cannot do the whole job. Out of the concern to preserve more open spaces the Bucks County Park Foundation [now the Heritage Conservancy] was formed as a private nonprofit corporation to encourage and receive gifts of land for future park lands and facilities.

Its purpose further states that it will receive land for the protection of the stream valleys, lakes and ponds in Bucks County, and for the setting aside of other lands in Bucks County necessary to assure present and future generations an adequate amount of open land, thus to provide a means for preserving such land for the recreation, exercise, and education of the public.

*Robert W Pierson, January 1962
Doylestown Panorama*



Builders celebrate the raising of the frame for their cottage.

Bridget Wingert: Happy to Be Here A hand-crafted cottage

Little Pond Arts Retreat in Nazareth, north of Bucks County, is the home of husband and wife Bill George, co-founder of Touchstone Theatre, and Bridget George, executive director of the Bach Choir. Both organizations are mainstays of the City of Bethlehem.

Little Pond, according to its website, is “a meeting place for visual, literary and performing arts, dedicated to inspiring people of all ages and walks of life to rekindle the spark of individual creativity.” The 32-acre farm has plenty of space for seekers of inspiration to camp and listen to whatever muse they find in rural Pennsylvania. It’s often used by theater companies or musical organizations. Sometimes it is religious organizations.

For two years, a builder, as artistic as the people who come to Little Pond for solitude, has been creating a structure he calls “the first Natural Built home in the Lehigh Valley.” The structure is a 1,400-square-foot timber frame cottage addition to the Georges’ farmhouse, joined to the farmhouse by a breezeway. It will be home for the Georges’ son and daughter-in-law.

Mark Southard, with his company, Artisanal Structures LLC, is the builder. The company focuses on locally sourced materials fabricated by skilled artisans. Southard is chairman of the Natural Builders Guild of the Lehigh Valley, a Working Group of the Alliance for Sustainable Communities LV. He was the founding president of Habitat for Humanity of the Lehigh Valley.

Southard came to the Lehigh Valley by way of Afghanistan, where he was ready to begin studies for a Ph.D. September 12, 2001. Osama Bin Laden’s attack on the World Trade Center’s Twin Towers the day before meant giving up that pursuit. But he went back to Afghanistan with the Army, doing research on the country’s socio-economic situation.

Today Southard builds with materials of the earth, straw, stone, bamboo and sustainably harvested wood. The cottage’s frame is wood salvaged from an 1850s timber frame barn in Hellertown. The foundation is a trench filled with rubble – recycled masonry and stone.

“Once you begin doing this, you see it’s a beautiful way to build,” Southard said. The interior walls have a finish like suede leather. “His buildings are homes that breathe. The outside walls are hand-applied lime plaster; inside walls are hand-applied

earthen plaster.

Straw bales fill an 18-inch space between exterior and interior walls, creating a highly insulated envelope. The window sills are deep to fit the space between the walls. Southard said there is no standard insulation value but compared it to an R value of 40 with standard insulation.

A steel and wood open spiral staircase enhances the interior. The staircase banisters are fabricated from salvaged carcasses of sheet steel from a farm equipment manufacturer’s cutting table. The oak flooring was resawn from 300-year-old salvaged wood from the barn’s summer beams.

The cottage has two bedrooms, two full baths and a woodstove. There’s also a study, and a meditation area in the master bedroom.

It’s a green building made greener by its live roof and greenhouse.

“Natural buildings are healthier for the people who live in them and healthier for the planet,” Southard said. “Many natural building techniques are inspired by vernacular architecture from around the world.”

Traditional techniques are used with a bow to contemporary “building science and engineering, which has delivered a way of building that supports today’s ecologically mindful lifestyle, complies with codes, and withstands the test of time.”

With the cottage complete, Artisanal Structures will move on to a project at Lake Nockamixon in Upper Bucks County. It is a remodeling job combined with new natural-built addition on 80 acres of land.

Southard described the project: “It consists of the full gut and remodel of an existing 1860s oak timber-frame farmhouse with attached smokehouse, and the new construction of a master suite and guest quarters attached by a steel and glass atrium. For this project an 1880s Saucon Valley barn was salvaged. It will comprise the structure of the new atrium and addition.”

Last Friday, Artisanal Structures and Little Pond Arts Retreat held an open house at the recently completed cottage residence extension before it is occupied. Architects, builders, Realtors, interior designers, and building-trades people were especially welcome. “Permaculture or eco-oriented individuals interested in non-toxic, breathable, organic habitat will be particularly interested in this unique home,” Southard said.

“It’s a handmade house – cozy,” Bill George said. Mark Southard can be reached at artisanalstructures.com. Little Pond Arts Retreat is at littlepond.org.

The new cottage was built from lumber salvaged from a Hellertown barn.



The new cottage was built from lumber salvaged from a Hellertown barn.

David Cuff: Short and Sweet Brief Biographies

Lance Armstrong

Sware his critics were wrong
But those titles from *Le Tour*
Were tainted by the *dope de jour*

David Cuff’s book, “Brief Biographies,” is a collection of light verse using the Cleinhow, a challenging poetic form devised by Edmund Clerihew Bentley when he was a student at St. Paul’s School in London.

The people who preserved the Five Mile Woods in Lower Makefield many years ago have commissioned an author to write their story. Heritage Conservancy and Bob Pierson, one of its founders, were a big part of the story.

Searching for background, Jeffrey Marshall, president of Heritage Conservancy looked through old magazines – Bucks County Realtor, Bucks County Traveler, Doylestown Panorama – because he recalled seeing articles about Pierson. Marshall found one where Pierson was looking into the future. He transcribed portions to use for a strategic planning meeting the conservancy had last week. “It is interesting how much of what he wrote is still relevant after almost 60 years,” Marshall said.

Pierson’s words are below.

What will Bucks County look like 10, 20 or even 50 years from now? When we talk about our increasing population for the years 1980 or 2010, many of today’s young people will actual-