

http://www.northwestgeorgianews.com/calhoun_times/regional-town-hall-highlights-importance-of-participation-on-political-power/article_8f389e98-db49-11e9-affe-bf05ebe1fdb3.html

Regional town hall highlights importance of participation on political power

Kelcey Caulder KCaulder@CalhounTimes.com Sep 20, 2019

1 of 4



Mandy Maloney (from left) Susannah Scott, and Wendy Davis talk about the importance of participating in the 2020 Census at regional town hall meeting at the Calhoun Depot.

Kelcey Caulder

The nonpartisan League of Women Voters of Rome-Floyd and Dalton-Whitfield jointly hosted a regional town hall meeting at the Calhoun Depot on Thursday night focusing on the importance of getting counted in the 2020 U.S. Census and how doing so, or failing to do so, might affect the redistricting process in 2020.

The featured speakers were Mandy Maloney of Rome, a partnership specialist with the U.S. Census Bureau; Rome City Commissioner Wendy Davis, and Susannah Scott, the president of the Board of Directors for the League of Women Voters of Georgia.

Each of the women on the panel have concerned themselves with the 2020 Census and view it as essential to democracy.

A major focus of the meeting was gerrymandering — the manipulation of district lines to protect or change political power. Gerrymandered districts, the panel said, are often strangely shaped in order to pack or spread voters of a particular political party, race or other demographic into specific districts in an attempt to influence the outcome of elections.

Getting accurate Census data is one way to fight back against the practice, which is barred by federal law in regard to race but is not necessarily barred in regard to political leanings.

“It’s important to get counted for a lot of reasons, but let’s get a little bit real. Do we want more or less political power for Northwest Georgia,” Davis asked. “If we count fewer of our neighbors, if we don’t get that count right, if we let our Hispanic neighbors just stay scared, because they are real scared right now, if we let them stay scared and not participate or stay mad and not participate, what are our numbers going to be? Accurate or low? Low, and low numbers mean that we get less of the power than we should be getting.”

Scott laid out some of the ways that Georgia’s League of Women Voters hopes to “control the fox in the hen house” and ensure a fair redistricting process.

First and foremost, she said, the group wants to place an independent special commission in charge of drawing maps and not leave redistricting entirely in the hands of politicians. Scott also emphasized the importance of citizen participation at every stage of the redistricting process, public hearings and redistricting standards that are enforceable in court.

“Those enforceable standards are important because if you don’t have standards, if you don’t have guidelines that you’re using when you’re making those redistricting decisions, then if something suspect is happening by legislators there is nothing a court can use to say they weren’t being fair or weren’t following the rules,” Scott said. “It’s harder to challenge improperly made districts unless you have those.”

One of the ways Scott suggested citizens could get involved and push for fair and representative redistricting is by encouraging their legislators to support the Democracy Act, a bill currently in the General Assembly that calls for an independent citizens' commission to be in charge of redistricting.

Under the Democracy Act, an independent citizens' commission of five people from the major political parties as well as four people not affiliated with either major party would come together to draw legislative districts based on Georgia's racial, ethnic, geographical and gender diversity so that districts are more representative of the state's actual make-up and elections are more competitive.

In addition to affecting congressional representation, the panel said the Census dictates the amount of federal funding the state receives. It could also affect the number of schools and hospitals that the government sees as necessary in a specific area.

For every 44 people that go uncounted in Georgia, Davis said the state will lose \$101,200 in taxes. Over 10 years, that comes out to \$1 million in lost taxes. When you look at 218 people, she said, it comes out to \$5 million over 10 years.

"In Marietta, they had a projection for how many people they would get counted in the 2010 Census. Well, when the count was done, the numbers were down. There were 7,636 people less than projected would be counted. That's \$17.5 million for one year. That's \$175 million over 10 years that they missed," Davis said. "Let's not leave millions of dollars on the table. Let's get everyone counted."

Maloney spoke of hard-to-count populations like low income communities, immigrant communities, undocumented individuals, seniors, millennials and renters. This year she hopes more of them will be counted due to the ease with which the Census can be completed.

"With the Census going online for the first time, it's easier than ever to participate in democracy," Maloney said. "If you don't want to do it online, if you don't want to do it using your smartphone, that's fine too. We will still get you a paper form and you can even call us and do complete it over the phone."

She also laid out the timeline for the Census. Every household will be contacted several times with an invitation to participate in the count, either by mail, phone, or in person. If a response isn't received, Maloney said, the Census Bureau will continue reaching out in an effort to get more of the population counted before the end of April.

“Please make sure when you’re answering the Census questions that you count every person in your home. There is a real problem with children under 5 not getting counted,” Maloney said, noting that nearly 1 million children 5 or younger went uncounted in the last Census. “Even if you have 12 people living in a house that only three people are supposed to live in, give an accurate count. No one sees that information other than the Census Bureau, and we won’t tell your landlord.”

Thursday’s town hall was one of 14 free, public events scheduled around the state aimed at educating the public about the 2020 Census and its impact on the redistricting process. Another, similar meeting will be held in Kennesaw on Oct. 10 from 7 to 9 p.m. at the Kennesaw community center, located at 2753 Watts Drive.