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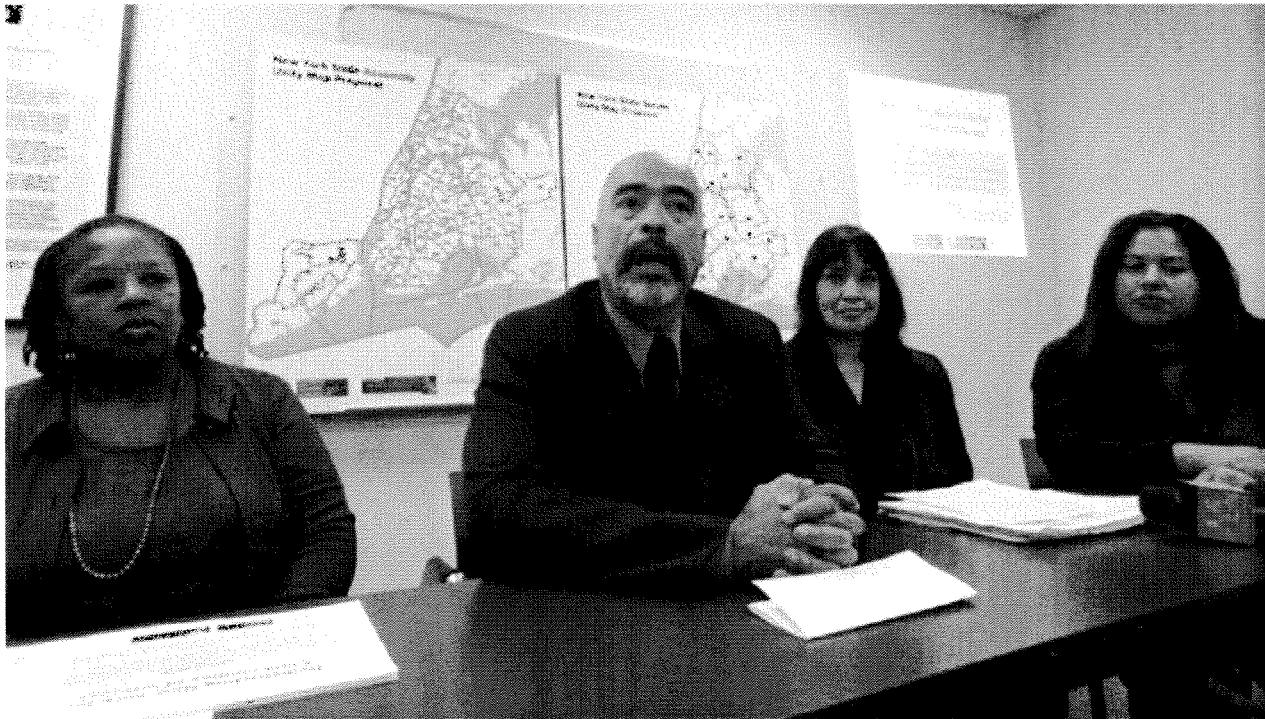
26,543 Reasons to Consider

New York coalition presents redistricting maps to boost Asian-American, Latino and African-American representation

The so-called Unity Maps are just one proposal to decide how the city's districts should be redrawn

BY LISA L. COLANGELO / NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

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MARK BONIFACIO/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS

Advocates (from l. to r.) Esmeralda Simmons, executive director of the Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College; Juan Cartagena, president of LatinoJustice; Margaret Fung, executive director of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund; and Lucia Gomez-Jimenez, executive director of La Fuente, favor redistricting efforts.

A coalition of Asian-American, Latino and African-American groups has released a new set of redistricting maps it believes will give the city's large ethnic populations a greater voice in future elections.

The so-called Unity Maps are just one proposal being sent to state lawmakers as they decide how Senate, Assembly and congressional districts in the city should be redrawn to reflect changes in the 2010 Census.

A state task force is slated to release its redistricting proposal in the next week or so.

The city's Asian-American population has boomed in recent years, and Latinos currently make up the largest minority group in the five boroughs.

"This is about making sure each person and their vote has the same weight as the next citizen," said Esmeralda Simmons, executive director of the Center for Law and Social Justice at Medgar Evers College, one of four groups that helped create the maps.

"It really is about ensuring voting rights," she said, "and that each district not only has the same number of people in it but that those people are not segments of communities but entire communities so that those communities can be empowered."

The coalition, which also includes the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, LatinoJustice and the National Institute for Latino Policy, released its first set of maps for the Assembly and Senate districts in October.

Those maps were revamped, and the group added one to outline proposed congressional districts.

Redistricting has traditionally been a politically charged endeavor, with both parties angling to keep seats and positions of power across the city.

The city's ethnic enclaves are often fractured in the process.

"This is one of the main reasons we need an independent process," said state Sen. Michael Gianaris (D-Queens), a leading redistricting reform advocate. "Ethnic minorities have traditionally been abused in the redistricting process for the political advancement of the majority parties."

Margaret Fung, executive director of AALDEF, said the coalition's Senate map redraws the 11th District in Queens to keep largely Asian neighborhoods of Flushing and Bayside together.

The 8th Congressional District would be reconfigured to include more of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, for its large Chinese and Latino communities.

In the Bronx, the growing Dominican community in the University Heights, Fordham and Tremont areas — currently divided among several different Senate districts — would be consolidated into one, according to Juan Cartagena, president of LatinoJustice.

In Queens, the large Latino communities in East Elmhurst, Jackson Heights and Corona would be kept together in one Senate district.

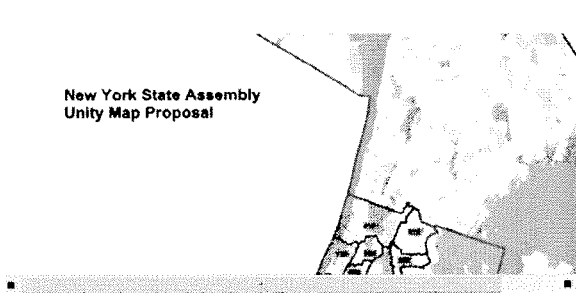
"This is a unity effort," Cartagena said. "We were careful not to step on each other's toes."

Simmons said her group also wanted to focus on a huge swath of central Brooklyn, stretching from Bedford-Stuyvesant to Canarsie, which has "the largest concentration of black people in the continental United States."

"It's not just about race," she said. "We want to make sure to link people who had commonality. There is a huge Caribbean immigrant population in the Canarsie area, and we wanted to try to capture that in the Assembly and Senate districts."

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