

Whitmire: Redistricting fight will take place on Senate floor

By Juan A. Lozano
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HOUSTON — The first Democratic senator to break ranks with the boycotting legislators who fled to New Mexico said Wednesday that ultimately congressional redistricting will have to be debated on the Texas Senate floor.

Sen. John Whitmire, a Houston Democrat, said if Republican Gov. Rick Perry decides to continue calling special legislative sessions on the issue, the governor can outlast the 10 Senate Democrats who remain in Albuquerque, N.M.

"We cannot remain in New Mexico indefinitely. At some point in time, unless you're prepared to live in New Mexico, you have to come back and debate the issue on the Senate floor," Whitmire told The Associated Press on Wednesday during an interview in his Houston office. "I really hope they'll weigh options that allows them to have an end plan, an end game, short of being out there any additional length of time."

Whitmire, who returned Tuesday night, spent Wednesday talking with constituents, community leaders and some Democratic and Republican state senators. His staff was busy answering telephone calls, some supportive and others critical of Whitmire.

The Houston legislator said he'll spend the rest of the week talking with local and state political leaders to try and bring the two parties together on redistricting.

He said he hopes to talk with Republican Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst this week. He said he has spoken with Republican senators Jeff Wentworth of San

Antonio and Florence Shapiro of Plano.

Whitmire said he doesn't expect Perry to call another special session immediately. If that were to happen, he said, he is not sure whether he would attend.

For now, he said, he doesn't believe he will be apprehended and taken back to the state Capitol by law officers.

"I don't think they want me at this stage," he said. "I'm doing them more good in the free world. But I'm monitoring it very carefully out of Austin. They're not going to slip up on me."

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— Sen. John Whitmire
Houston Democrat

Dewhurst said Wednesday that he would prefer a third special session be called within the next two weeks, although he has had no indication from Perry when a third would be called.

Eleven Senate Democrats fled to New Mexico on July 28 just as Perry was about to call a second consecutive special legislative session on redistricting. Their absence blocked a quorum in the 31-member chamber, shutting down Senate business. Two-thirds must be present for there to be a quorum.

Whitmire said there is still "a close bond" between him

and the Democratic senators who remain in New Mexico, even though some disagreed with his decision to return to Texas.

He said he also returned to Texas because he didn't want the Senate's so-called two-thirds rule permanently eroded, effecting other issues in the future besides redistricting.

Meanwhile, in Austin, Republican senators met behind closed doors to consider possible plans redrawing the state's congressional lines. Dewhurst said no conclusion was reached, but that senators were committed to reaching a consensus on a map by early next week.

The Democrats fled to New Mexico in part because they claimed GOP leaders violated the federal Voting Rights Act by dropping a traditional rule that requires two-thirds of the Senate to agree to debate a bill.

Republicans point out that the two-thirds provision hasn't been in place for all special sessions.

"I'm glad to be at home but I'm not celebrating anything. I'm very disappointed where we find ourselves, saddened by the condition the Senate finds itself and mad at those who created this unfortunate set of circumstances," Whitmire said. "Would I rather be here than New Mexico? Yeah. I'd rather be here than in Austin."

Whitmire said if any redistricting plan is passed by legislators, ultimately it will have to be approved by the courts. The Senate Democrats already have one lawsuit pending in federal court in Laredo.

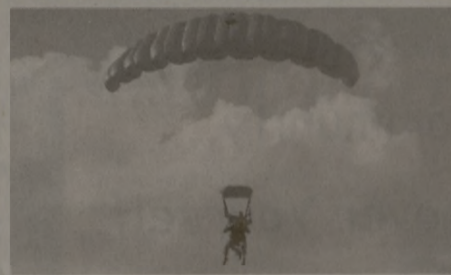
"It's my goal to get people back to the Senate floor, have a heated debate and move on to where (the Senate) will again be recognized as the greatest legislative body on Earth," Whitmire said.

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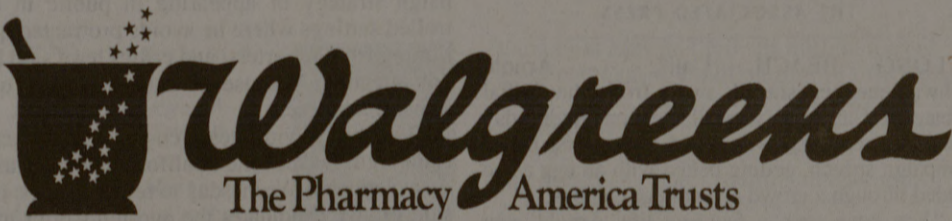
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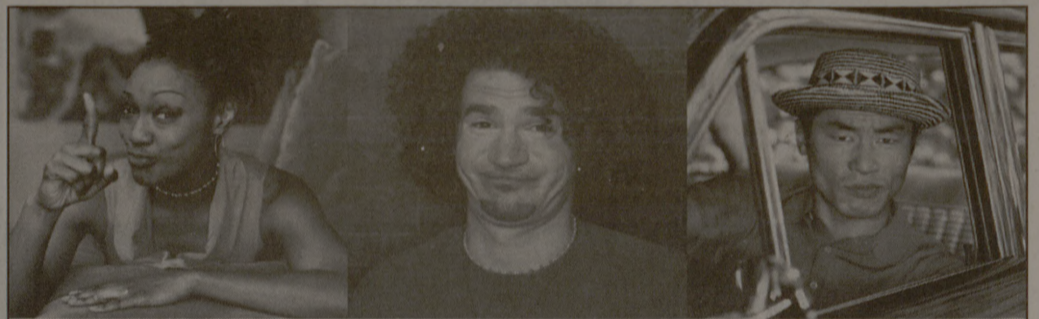
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