

TESTIMONY ON REDISTRICTING

TO: Honorable Members of the Redistricting Committee

FROM: Rabbi Shlomo Soroka

RE: Subject Matter On: Regional Communities and the Boundaries of Cook County Districts

DATE: Monday, June 21, 2021

The Orthodox Jewish community, which I represent, is one that unfortunately is often overlooked as a community of interest, despite our unique needs and interests. This community, which has grown significantly over the last decade, is primarily concentrated in the West Ridge area of Chicago, spilling over into Skokie and Lincolnwood. I have submitted a map that outlines where the community is mostly concentrated. The basic boundaries are Peterson to the south, Golf to the north, Skokie Blvd. to the west, and McCormick on the northeast and Western to the southeast.

Historical background and current demographics

The Orthodox Jewish community has been a significant part of the Illinois' social fabric since the early 1800s but it wasn't until the 1940's that they moved north to West Rogers Park, Peterson Park and Skokie, where new Jewish day schools were established. Until that point in time, the lack of a strong Jewish day school system made it challenging for families to raise their children as Orthodox Jews. Most of these Orthodox Jews assimilated or moved out of the region. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, Jewish leaders understood that a strong Jewish day school infrastructure was needed to rebuild, ensuring the continuity of our culture and integrity of our faith. With this new system, the number of Jews that identified as Orthodox began to rebound and experience a resurgence. In the 1960's the largest Jewish neighborhoods, including Jews of other denominations, were in West Rogers Park and Skokie. Over the last 70 years, most Jews have suburbanized and migrated out, but the Orthodox community has remained and grown, with exponential growth over the last 15 years or so. A 2010 JUF survey estimated there to be 21,000 Orthodox Jews in the area. Current estimates put that number at approximately 30,000. Over the last decade, enrollment in Orthodox Jewish schools has increased by over 50% to over 5,000 students, six new schools have opened, and five new major synagogues been built. In the past five years alone, over 300 families have moved into the community and over 30 retail stores have opened. Our neighborhoods are not only the center of Illinois' Orthodox Jewish community but are the epicenter of Midwest Orthodox Jewry.

Top Issues: The top three issues for our community are all impacted by county government: Public safety, Education, Affordable housing and property values

- 1) **Public safety:** Orthodox Jews are visibly identifiable from afar and are more exposed on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays when travel by car is prohibited. With anti-Semitism on the rise both globally and locally, and many recent violent attacks specifically targeting Orthodox Jews, this is a real concern.
- 2) **Education:** As I mentioned prior, an educational infrastructure is an existential need. As history has painfully taught us, without our own school system, we tend to assimilate and disappear into the American melting pot. In a half a century, most of Chicago's (and America's) Orthodox community assimilated into the American melting pot, and that hemorrhage only began to reverse itself with the Jewish Day School Movement. Today we have the largest Jewish school in the Midwest and our school system attracts families from across the country. Our approach to education has a rich history and has been adapted to prepare our children for a successful life in the modern world without compromising over 3,000 years of tradition. Our schools produce graduates who go on to have successful careers in virtually every sector while remaining true to their heritage. We believe in a strong and well-funded public educational system but for the vast majority of our children, public school is simply not an option.
- 3) **Affordable housing** and property values: Due to the need to be within walking distance of our synagogues and near our schools and kosher food outlets, we all live in the same areas; there are no "rich neighborhoods" or "poor neighborhoods." The wealthy, the middle-class, and the poor all live side by side, but this drives up property values, which coupled with rising property taxes, is creating a housing crisis for our community. This is especially challenging for our growing families, as we tend to have more children than the national average; eight or ten-plus household members are fairly common.

Conclusion:

As mentioned earlier, it is estimated that approximately 30,000 Jewish Illinoisans identify as Orthodox, with most living in the same geographic area. Much of this area is contained within the boundaries of the 13th district, but the border between the 13th and 10th districts splits the community at Devon Avenue. We would like to see our community consolidated as much as possible in the new map.