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Group argues prison populations result in unbalanced wards

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The Fulton City Council is set to hear and vote on a second reading of a bill that reorganizes the city's wards based on results of the 2010 U.S. Census.

Although Director of Administration Bill Johnson said it is not a concern that has ever been raised before, the Prison Policy Initiative — which, according to its website, is a "non-profit, non-partisan (group that) documents the impact of mass incarceration on individuals, communities, and the national welfare." —recently contacted The Fulton Sun to express concern that the local prison counts were included in those redistricting plans.

Peter Wagner, executive director for the initiative, said he runs a project that looks at how cities with large prisons draw their city council districts. He argued that including the prison population — even though they cannot vote and are not actual residents of the city — in ward populations lends those wards "disproportionate influence over city affairs."

"Fulton's wards have about 3,200 people each, but almost half of the second ward is incarcerated," Wagner said. "Using prison populations to pad the second ward unintentionally dilutes the votes of every other ward that has the required population.

"It's a basic fairness question, and it's an outcome question when it comes to regional issues."

That is precisely why Gregory Beavers — city administrator for Farmington, Mo., which also has a large prison population — said his city does not include the prison population when setting up its wards, even though that is how the U.S. Census Bureau presents census results.

"Our wards are set up to give equal representation, and quite simply, (the prison population) can't vote," Beavers said. "They're included in the count, but that ward is larger by approximately the population of the prison."

"There is no rational reason to include them in the ward count because it gives imbalanced representation for your citizens. The elected officials are not elected to represent the inmates."

Despite those concerns, Johnson said Fulton has always included the prison population when organizing the city's wards.

"We've never considered not counting them. They've been

counted in every redistricting attempt in the past decade," Johnson said.

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—Peter Wagner, executive director of Prison Policy Initiative

Presented with Wagner and Beavers' arguments about unfair representation, Johnson responded, "that could be one point of view, I'm not going to disagree."

"Another predominant factor (when laying out wards) is the college

factor — we count students. I don't know the percentage of them that actually are registered to vote here, but we do know it is small," Johnson said, noting that Fulton's four wards all are within 1 percent of the others in terms of population, even though the law allows up to 10 percent. "No system is going to be perfect, and you're not going to get everybody to agree on one system, so we take the census at face value and draw lines based on what is provided by the census bureau."

The council is set to vote on the proposed ward adjustments at its next meeting, to be held at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at city hall.