

Benton County Commissioner District Redistricting Report

Spring 2022

This Benton County Commissioner District Redistricting Report (“Report”) serves as the final staff report, historical record, and presentation of alternatives for Benton County’s decennial redistricting process. The Report is presented to Commissioners as Edition 1 before a new district map is selected, then will be revised to a final Edition 2 to complete the process for the record.

Introduction

This report concerns the county commissioner redistricting process undertaken in 2021 and 2022 for Benton County which will result in the rebalancing and redrawing of the County’s three commissioner districts for the 2022-2031 electoral cycle. Redistricting is done every 10 years following the nation’s decennial census which occurs in years ending in 0.

This process is entirely different from redistricting processes regarding congressional or legislative districts (which happen at the state level) or other local governments with similar district structures. Our process occurs locally and only concerns county commissioner districts. The redistricting process is driven by a volunteer committee and managed by county staff, ultimately resulting in the selection of new district boundaries by the board of commissioners.

This staff report details much of the process for the record. Three alternative maps were developed by the Redistricting Committee and forwarded to the Commissioners. You can skip ahead to the discussion of the alternatives, which begins on page 7.

There has been a little confusion across the state about what the “redistricting plan” is. Is it one map, is it the collection of three maps, is it the entire redistricting exercise? For our purposes and in staying with past custom, the full proposal developed by the Redistricting Committee that will be submitted to the County Commissioners – including all three map alternatives and this report – serves as the *Benton County Commissioner District Redistricting Report*, and the **Redistricting Plan** is the Alternative 1 map, which is the Committee’s preferred and recommended alternative.

Committee

Five members of the public volunteered their personal time to serve on the Redistricting Committee. Benton County appreciates their interest and participation in developing good, defensible alternatives from which a final map selection can be made. Committee members included:

- **Rachel Little** – *Kennewick*
- **Justin Raffa** – *Richland*
- **David Reeploeg** – *Richland*
- **Neal Ripplinger** – *Prosser*
- **Maricela Sanchez** (Chair) – *Prosser*

Benton County staff assisting the Committee included:

- **Adam J. Fyall**, Commissioners Office
- **Kyle Johnson**, Geographic Information Systems

Schedule

Census data were received by the County in September 2021 and staff began with background work and with assembling the Redistricting Committee. With apologies from staff, Benton County did begin the process very late and therefore finishes very late and beyond the target dates set in statute. The following were major milestones:

- | | |
|--------------------|---|
| February 23 | Committee Meeting #1
(Kennewick) Committee goes over all aspects of the endeavor as a group. Introduction to the mapping software and further discussion of project requirements. Committee then does work on developing alternatives. |
| March 16 | Committee Meeting #2
(Kennewick) After further review and extensive discussion of criteria and priority, Committee develops three alternatives working with staff and the mapping software. Committee votes to approve three alternatives, also selecting a “preferred” alternative. Committee transmits its three alternatives to the Board of Commissioners for further action. |
| April 5 | Commissioner Meeting
(Prosser) <i>Not a formal hearing.</i> Staff introduces the Redistricting Plan to Commissioners at their regular meeting. |
| April 12 | Commissioner Hearing #1
(Prosser) Redistricting Plan heard for the first of two times. Testimony taken. Board may request more information or additional work by staff and the Committee. |
| April 19 | Commissioners Hearing #2
(Prosser) Redistricting Plan heard for a second time, testimony taken. If Board is satisfied with an alternative, it may be adopted at this time. If further work is needed, alternatives are remanded to the Committee. |

History

Counties undertake the commissioner district redistricting process every ten years after the results of the decennial US Census are released. This redistricting exercise applies only to county commissioner districts, of which Benton County has three. Benton County was created in 1905 and appears to have undertaken more or less the same process since at least the 1930s, which is what we continued with in this edition.

Unfortunately, the overall archival record for redistricting is poor. Available maps that we are able to locate are of low quality and do not exist for all decades. The maps that do exist are often difficult to decipher and there is little in the way of accompanying narrative. A couple of examples of historic maps are on the next page.

Not unexpectedly, the best historical records correlate with the most recent redistricting exercises, but even that material is limited. There are no committee notes available for those redistricting cycles. Staff will continue to work to try to assemble a better archive of the County’s redistricting history.

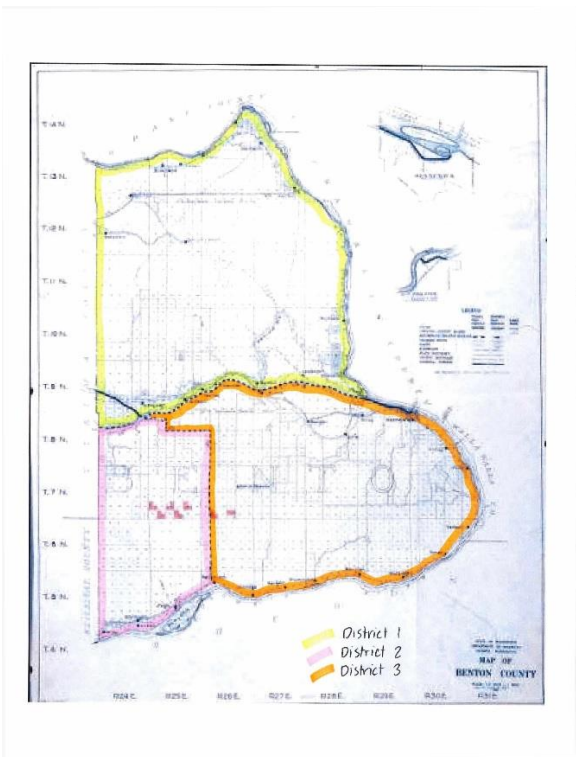


Figure 1 – 1932 Redistricting Map
 Early in the 20th Century during the pre-Hanford era, the County’s population balance was weighted more to the west. At this time, all three districts converged in the Prosser vicinity rather than in the Columbia Center area as they have done in more recent decades.

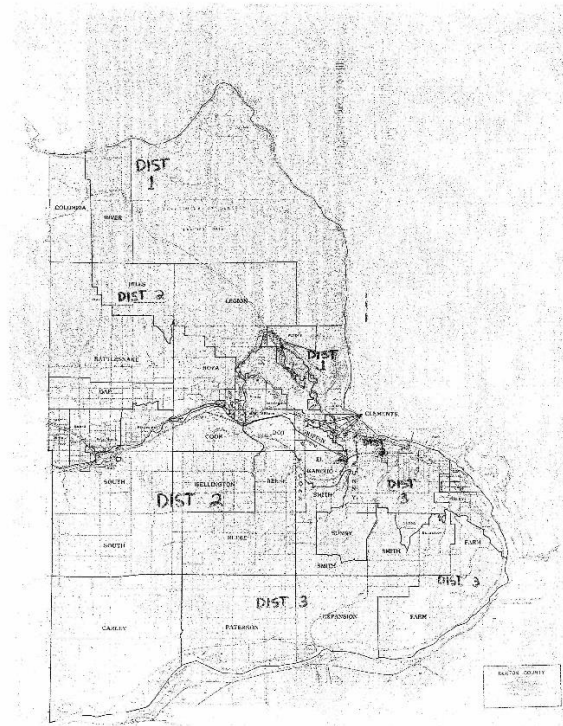


Figure 2 – 1981 Redistricting Map
 This map is representative of much of what we find in the record. We know that by 1981 the districts had taken-on geographies more familiar to what we have now, but many of these maps are difficult to decipher without color or distinct bold lines.

Process

Statutory Requirements

Benton County’s commissioner electoral district redistricting process is governed by **RCW 29A.76.010** and includes among other things, the following specific requirements as quoted from the law:

- “Each internal director, council, or commissioner district shall be as nearly equal in population as possible to each and every other such district comprising the municipal corporation, county, or special purpose district.
- Each district shall be as compact as possible.
- Each district shall consist of geographically contiguous area.
- Population data may not be used for purposes of favoring or disfavoring any racial group or political party.
- To the extent feasible and not inconsistent with the basic enabling legislation for the municipal corporation, county, or district, the district boundaries shall coincide with existing recognized natural boundaries and shall, to the extent possible, preserve existing communities of related and mutual interest.”

County Procedure

Using the direction provided in statute and the new Census information (see next section), the County went about redrawing its districts. The Redistricting Committee was assembled and given a free hand to develop alternatives for final consideration by the Board of Commissioners, who ultimately adopt the new districts. Staff supported the Committee and Commissioners to the best of its abilities. Important aspects of the County's process included:

- **GIS Tool:** Everyone involved in this process recognized the tremendous advantage gained over previous generations by means of technology. Gone were the days of sprawling printed maps across tables and hammering through the process with pencils and calculators. Benton County's Geographic Information Systems Department was able to customize a software tool loaded with necessary census and boundary information and make this available to Committee members to work with on their own time, making meetings and discussions exponentially more efficient. The graphic interface was responsive and easy to read. It is hard to imagine having done this a different way.
- **Census Data:** In addition to the raw population county data, which comes to the County by way of census blocks, the Committee also used racial/ethnic data and recent voting data.
- **Precincts:** In addition to statutory requirements stated above, another important aspect of redrawing the districts is that their boundaries must follow existing election precinct boundaries and may not split those precincts. The redrawing and creation of new precincts is a separate process. This can be a limiting factor and often contributes to why district boundaries look a little strange or do not follow more obvious geographic or other boundaries, usually in rural areas where the precincts can be quite large.
- **Integrity:** Many redistricting processes around the country and at different levels have come under scrutiny in recent years. Accusations of "gerrymandering", neglect, or other forms of manipulation have plagued governments from the state level down to small special purpose districts. Our Board of Commissioners made it clear from the beginning that they did not want Benton County's motives questioned, integrity impugned, or the public's trust broken by this redistricting process just like with any other County endeavor. The Committee and staff believe we have upheld that mandate.
- **Late Start:** Benton County got a very late start in this process and will finish just inside the allowed 8-month time window though well beyond the December 31, 2021 target set by the state. While not optimal it did allow the Benton team to observe and learn from the work of other counties across the state. The Committee and staff were able to examine some of the challenges faced or in some cases created by other counties and also note areas for future process improvements.

The Redistricting Committee members worked well together and advanced through the project with little difficulty. It has been the standard practice across the state to develop three different alternatives. Benton County's Committee followed this example. The Committee voted unanimously to forward each of the three alternatives to Commissioners for final consideration. Included in these three alternatives is a preferred alternative which the Committee believes to be the best way forward. If Commissioners are able to endorse one of these alternatives as-is, the selected boundaries will be made final by resolution, filed with the Auditor, and submitted to the State. This finalization includes having each district legally described, which staff will facilitate. If Commissioners determine that more work needs to be done before a final map can be chosen, staff will work with the Committee to complete that work before resubmitting to the Board in as timely of a manner as possible.

Census

The Census Bureau released the results of the 2020 United States Census in the summer of 2021. This data was transmitted to Benton County by Washington State in September 2021. Based upon review of these results as applied to Benton County, all districts have grown, with District 1 growing the most and District 3 growing the least over the course of the decade.

The total county population based on the 2020 Census is 206,873. When divided evenly by three, this results in an optimum target of 68,957 per district for rebalancing.

	<u>District 1</u>	<u>District 2</u>	<u>District 3</u>
2010 Census	57,848	59,580	57,749
2020 Census	72,129	70,647	64,097
<i>Change</i>	<i>14,281</i>	<i>11,067</i>	<i>6,348</i>

Considerations

In addition to statutory requirements, the Committee considered the following ten things in the development of the three alternatives, some of which have been discussed elsewhere in this report and which can at times conflict with each other, necessitating balancing acts:

- As mentioned above, the **optimum population target** for each district would be 68,957 per district. We are allowed to operate within a three percent (3%) window, so the acceptable population range per district is 67,397 to 70,517 person per district.
- The commissioner districts have remained largely static for several decades, so while the Committee wanted to explore new ways of looking at the map, **disruption** to the established paradigm was also a key consideration. With Alternative 1 in particular, a goal was minimize changes and limit confusion for voters while still cleaning things up.
- Keeping the previous point in mind, the Committee was informed by **history**, and this is more visible in Alternative 3. There were other draft options that had all of the districts converging on a single location such as in the 1932 map, and others that looked at making District 1 more of a “north-of-the-Yakima River” feature such as it was earlier in the last century.
- As mentioned in the statute, retainage or protection of “**intact communities**” is considered positive in redistricting exercises. The Committee put a lot of thought into how communities such as Finley, Red Mountain, the Roza Slope, and the South County/Horse Heaven Hills should be handled.
- Similar to the above item, the **boundaries** of existing entities were a consideration. While precincts are not to be divided, other boundaries can be crossed. Still, the Committee believed that generally speaking, limiting such splitting is ideal. The Committee looked at many options that divided districts along city limits rather than across them. For example, in most cases [much of] Richland and West Richland were retained together. The Committee ultimately liked the idea of placing all of the Hanford Site within a single district, and that is evident in all three final alternatives, which is a change from the current map. Legislative districts – which have also been recently redrawn at the state level – were not considered.
- The current districts, which have held-up well in their current configurations for at least the past quarter-century, can generally be called a Richland or “north” district (D1), a Kennewick or “east” district (D3), and everything else (D3). This has generally created a good balance of **urban/suburban/rural** for each district, which may or may not be a priority; as well as favoring

existing “intact communities” discussed above. The Committee examined this quite bit. Alternative 2 takes a more radical approach, creating an “urban core” district in Kennewick similar to what is seen in many other counties. Ultimately, the Committee’s preferred alternative stayed closer to the existing paradigm that has a balanced mix of rural, suburban, and urban for each of the three districts.

- As mentioned elsewhere, the intentional practice of isolating, splitting, diluting, or otherwise manipulating known and identifiable **ethnic** or **racial populations** for electoral gain or loss in the redistricting process has become the signature point of contention in the redistricting conversation nationally. In Eastern Washington this has manifest to our north (Franklin County) and to our west (Yakima County) in two counties where there are substantial and concentrated Hispanic populations that some people think have been disenfranchised. Our Committee looked at this closely. Benton County’s ethnic demographics and map are a little different than the other two examples cited. Our commissioner districts historically do not show evidence of the issues cited herein, and Benton County has never been called to question on this matter. Still, our Committee took this very seriously and believes that its work in all three alternatives is unimpeachable in this regard.
- Similar to the above bullet and also as mentioned in the statute, redistricting cannot be used to manipulate recognized **political/electoral geography**. The Committee examined recent voting results. It is no secret that Benton County tends to vote strongly Republican across the board, and it is also no surprise that the Democrat vote trends higher in the urban areas. However, there is no obvious or large reliably Democrat voting pockets, and nothing with current districts or in anything that the Committee is proposing isolates, dilutes, or manipulates the electorate based on any known or foreseen voting trends.

- **“Gerrymandering”** has become a favorite term in redistricting discussions. Simply put, gerrymandering is the process of manipulating the boundaries of an electoral constituency so as to favor or disfavor a party, class, or other specific group of people. Figure 3 provides a nonspecific illustration of what gerrymandering can look like. People start to suspect gerrymandering when they see districts in strange shapes – things that do not look natural or that do not follow expected lines of geography, infrastructure, or existing

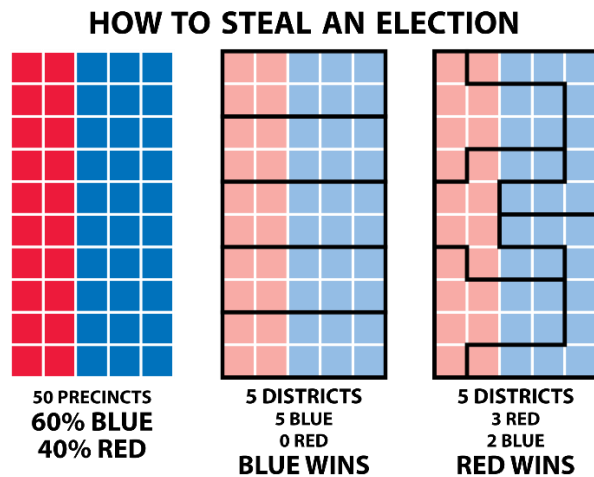


Figure 3 – Abstract examples of gerrymandering

boundaries. Another red flag is when something very radical is proposed in the redistricting process that is not easily explained by obvious factors. The Committee did not gerrymander and invested great effort to make sure that their alternatives do not give any suggestion of such.

- It was interesting to observe and learn from what has happened with **other counties’** redistricting efforts and what those have yielded. Four examples:
 - Jefferson County (Figure 4) has commissioner districts that change very little from cycle to cycle. The county has an extremely concentrated urban population in the Port Townsend corner with a suburban ring and then a massive rural and largely unpopulated region beyond that, most of which is within Olympic National Park. For Jefferson County

it would seem, redistricting is a fairly simple decennial tweaking exercise. This looks a little more like our Committee’s Alternative 2.

- Kitsap County’s committee presented three alternatives to their commissioners, one of which was completely unchanged. There was significant population growth in the county on the whole, but it was distributed such that districts did not have to be changed as they all fell within the population tolerances. This was definitely an anomaly. Ultimately Kitsap did decide to make minor changes to their boundaries to better rebalance the districts.
- Neighboring Franklin and Yakima counties both faced separate lawsuits ahead of their redistricting as mentioned. Some Washington cities faced similar situations. Yakima County faced the issue head-on and has radically altered its districts. Figure 5 shows the new districts (shaded) and the existing/old districts drawn over the top. The existing districts took a very justifiable approach similar to what has been discussed in this memo of cutting a pie with the city of Yakima as its center so that everyone had a piece of everything – urban and rural. The argument against this is that it dissects and dilutes that urban and also highly Hispanic population. As shown, Yakima County will move forward with a north/south/center (city) map. As of this memo, the situation in Franklin is as yet unresolved but it revolves around similar circumstances to Yakima. The takeaway from each of these examples is that it is best to be aware of these issues and meet them head-on rather than to face lawsuits and have your redistricting process played-out in the courts.

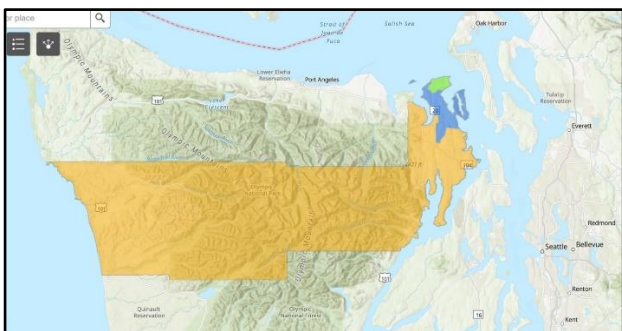


Figure 4 – Jefferson County 2022-2031 Commissioner Districts

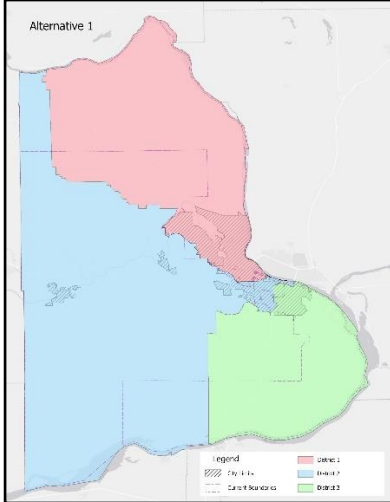


Figure 5 – Yakima County 2022-2031 Commissioner Districts (new districts shaded, old districts outlined)

Alternatives

Benton County has applied the established statutory criteria as well as other considerations discussed above to prepare three alternatives. The Redistricting Committee voted unanimously to forward the three alternatives to the Board of Commissioners for further consideration, and also to name Alternative 1 as the “preferred alternative” as the map it believes best meets objectives of the assignment. Below is a comparison of the three maps. Larger full-page renditions of the maps are included in the attachments at the end of this document.

Figure 6



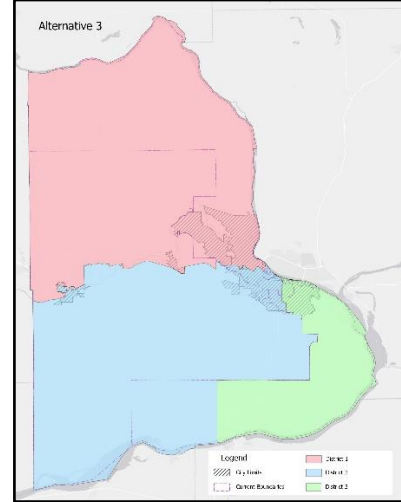
Alternative 1

Figure 7



Alternative 2

Figure 8



Alternative 3

Side-by-side comparison of the three alternatives.

Alternative 1 (Preferred)

Alternative 1 represents a gentle rebalancing of the districts based on the foundation of the existing districts, which have largely been in place for the past half-century or more with modest, incremental alterations each decade. The population is accustomed to these districts. The changes in this alternative seek to smooth-out and “compact” the districts, to use “recognized boundaries”, and “to the extent possible, preserve existing communities of related and mutual interest” per direction of RCW 29A.76.010. This is the least radical of the three alternatives. *Alternative 1 was selected by the Redistricting Committee as the most preferred of their three alternatives.* A few Alternative 1 highlights:

- **Convergence Zone:** Most of the substantive shifts occurred in what was dubbed the “Convergence Zone” – the area of South Richland and West Kennewick where all three districts meet. This has probably been the case for many past cycles. Compared with the 2012-2021 districts, District 1 shifts a little to follow Gage Boulevard more cleanly as a south boundary, and District 3 is adjusted and compacted into central and eastern Kennewick largely along the Edison Street corridor as a boundary. Overall, District 2 has a slightly larger footprint in the Convergence Zone area (see Figure 11 in the attachments).
- **District 1:** Some small modifications are made to District 1 in the Richland/West Richland, with attention paid to the West Richland city limits. Visually, a more noticeable change comes in the northern parts of the district. The Committee liked the idea of including the well-established Hanford Site wholly within the district. This could be called more of a geopolitical change rather than a substantive one as nobody lives on the Hanford Site. However the Site is managed as a unit by the federal government and is closely associated with Richland, making it appropriate to pull it into the district in its entirety. Another change affects the far northwestern corner of the County. This sparsely populated area, was shifted to District 2.
- **District 2:** This has been the western district for many years, including Prosser, Benton City, the Roza Slope, most of the Yakima Valley, and much of the Horse Heaven Hills. This is largely preserved in Alternative 1 with a few shifts at Hanford, in the far northwest, and in the Convergence Zone as discussed above.

- **District 3:** District 3 is made more compact in Alternative 1, pulling the western boundary back to the east in the Horse Heaven Hills and in Kennewick. The Kennewick-Finley-Wallula-Plymouth crescent is retained, but does not extend all the way to Paterson which is shifted to District 2.

Alternative 2

The Committee wanted to explore the concept of having a truly urbanized district similar to what we see in many other jurisdictions. In this case, the conceptual District 3 is created by compressing the district on the densely populated central and eastern Kennewick core, stretching slightly into adjoining west Finley. This could have been done a number of ways, but the Committee settled on moving the district's western boundaries a little farther west while drawing-in the large rural portions to the south and east and thus yielding those to District 2. District 1 is nearly identical to its Alternative 1 variant in Alternative 2. The Committee notes that while District 1 is relatively large geographically due to the Hanford Site its population footprint is fairly compressed and urban/suburban.

The Committee determined that the tradition of having three districts each of relatively large geographic area and at least two with a substantial rural component balanced with the urban area remains the best option, so Alternative 1 is preferred.

Alternative 3

This alternative harkens back to earlier days when the County had a distinct north district bounded more or less by the Columbia and Yakima rivers such as depicted in the 1932 shown earlier. Other distinctions of this alternative are that the Prosser area would two-district coverage, District 2 would bite more into the Tri-Cities urban core, and Benton City and Red Mountain would be pulled into District 1. Alternative 3 spreads the urban core more evenly across the three districts while also giving each district a substantial rural area.

While noting the attributes of this approach and appreciating the homage to the County's early day pre-Hanford boom, the Committee ultimately decided that Alternative 3 was a bit too radical and not reflective of something that anyone has been asking for.

Analysis

A rebalancing endeavor of this sort is a practice in trade-offs. There are many right answers and good ways to go about it. The Committee examined many approaches and the nuances of each, ultimately presenting three different alternatives that embody many of the approaches. In the end, the Committee's recommendation is for a more traditional and less radical map that makes adjustments rather than wholesale changes. The current paradigm has worked well for decades – *if it's not broken, don't try to fix it*. Some notable points:

- Demography does not pose the challenges in Benton County at this time such that it does in some other counties, but the Committee looked at this closely to make sure that nothing they were recommended could be reasonably called to question in regards to splitting, lumping, diluting, or otherwise manipulating demographically identifiable voting populations.
- In the preferred Alternative 1, Finley and the southeastern corner of the County are preserved in District 3 with Kennewick.
- In all alternatives, the Hanford Site is presented as an intact unit within District 2. Perhaps not functionally significant, but believed by the Committee and staff to be an improvement.
- One area that was wrestled with a little bit was the area of South Richland that abuts Badger Mountain on the north side. These neighborhoods were in District 2 previously and remain so.

The Committee looked at following the city limit through this area and carrying this strip over into District 2 but the numbers just didn't make that practical on balance.

- Predictably, most of the substantive "horse trading" was in the Convergence Zone area as the boundaries of all three districts ebb and flow in that corridor. We suspect it will be that way the next time around as well.

A topic that came up was future growth, which seems to be unabated in the Benton County for the foreseeable future. This is not part of the charge for the Committee and we are not supposed to predict the future in this process. Nonetheless it was interesting to look at the impact that anticipated large developments around Prosser, Badger Mountain South, and the Lewis & Clark Ranch may have over the next decade; and it will be interesting to see how these facts on the ground play-out ten years from now when redistricting is revisited. It turns out that in Alternative 1, District 2 does have the least amount of population but looks to be the place where most of the growth will happen over the next decade.

Recommendation

The Benton County Commissioner District Redistricting Committee recommends the adoption of Alternative 1 as the new map and districts for the Board of County Commissioners for the next decennial electoral cycle – 2022-2031.

Attachments

The following larger format maps are attached to the end of this document:

- **Figure 9** – 2012-2021 Districts
- **Figure 10** – Alternative 1
- **Figure 11** – Alternative 1 (Convergence Zone)
- **Figure 12** – Alternative 2
- **Figure 13** – Alternative 3
- **Figure 14** – 2020 Census Race & Ethnicity Outtake

Closing

The Redistricting Committee brought many perspectives and life experiences to their work. The deliberations were well-informed and comprehensive. Benton County appreciates the time volunteered by these citizens and the work performed by staff. Another final acknowledgment should be made of the software tool built and supported by Kyle Johnson in the GIS Department. This not only made working through the maps and alternatives immeasurably easier but also fun.

This report is and the redistricting alternatives described herein are submitted to the Benton County Board of Commissioners for their consideration and further action. Thank you.

Adam J. Fyall (staff liaison)
Sustainable Development Manager

Figure 9 – 2012-2021 Commissioner Districts

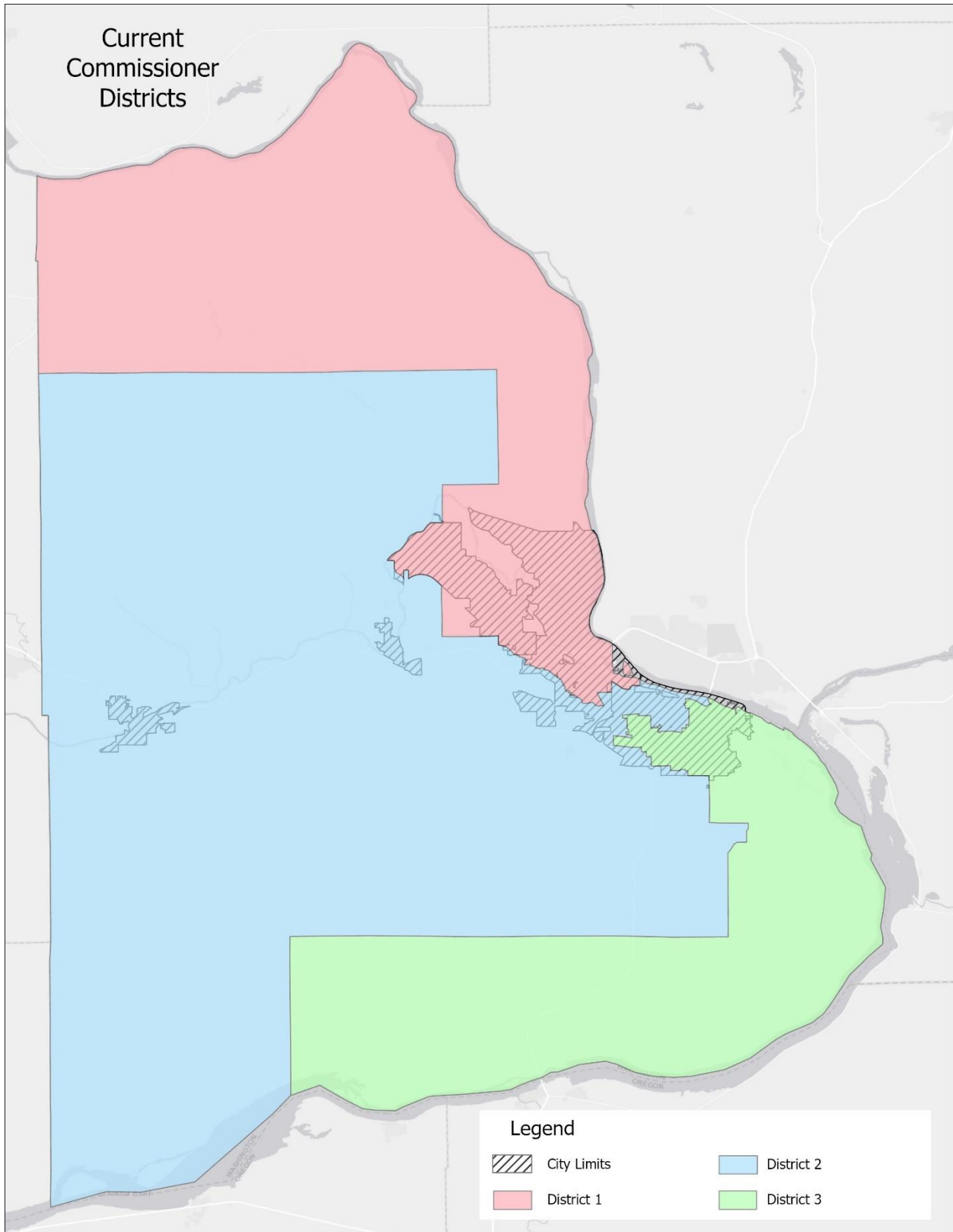


Figure 10 – 2022-2031 Alternative 1

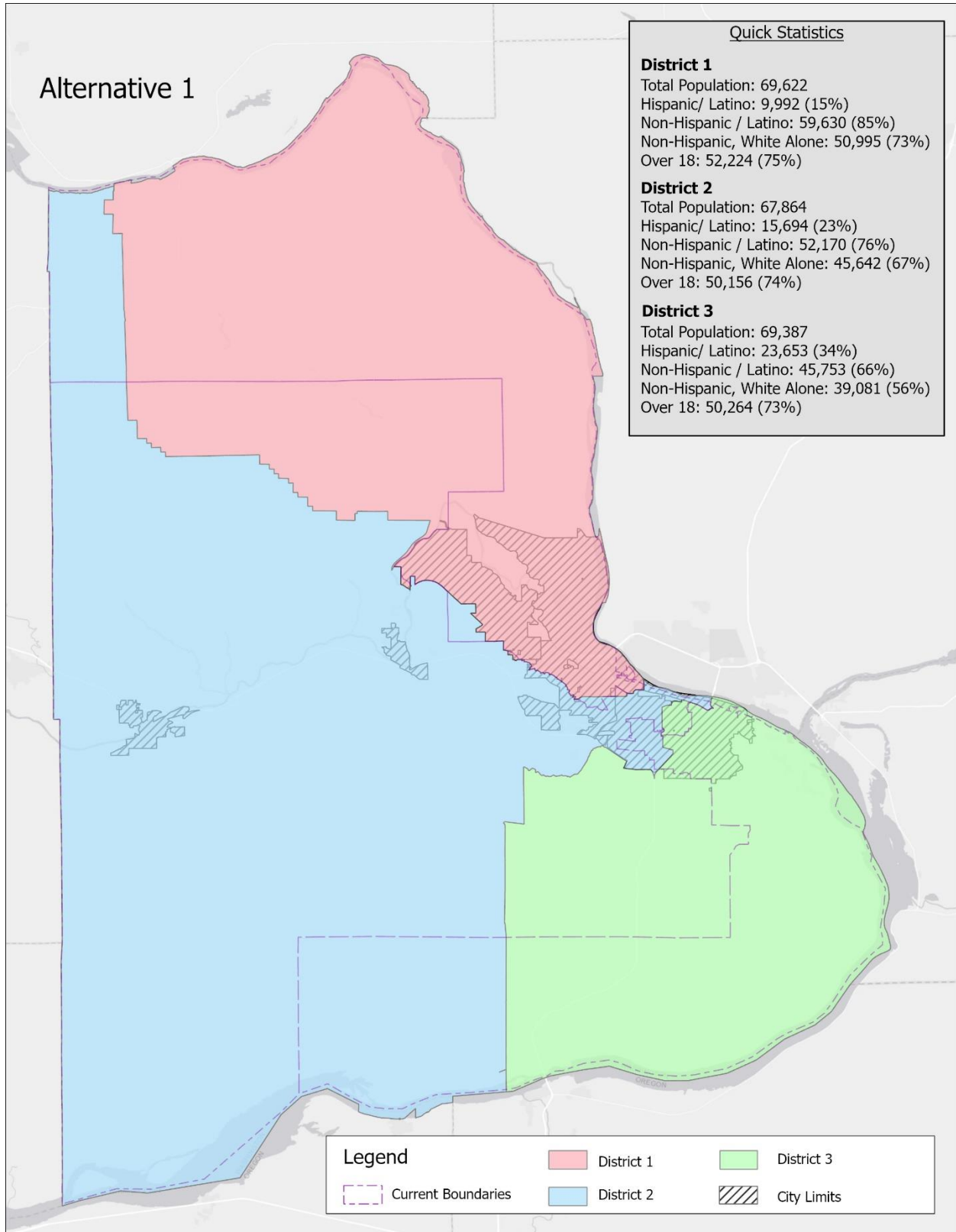


Figure 11 – 2022-2031 Alternative 1 (Convergence Zone)

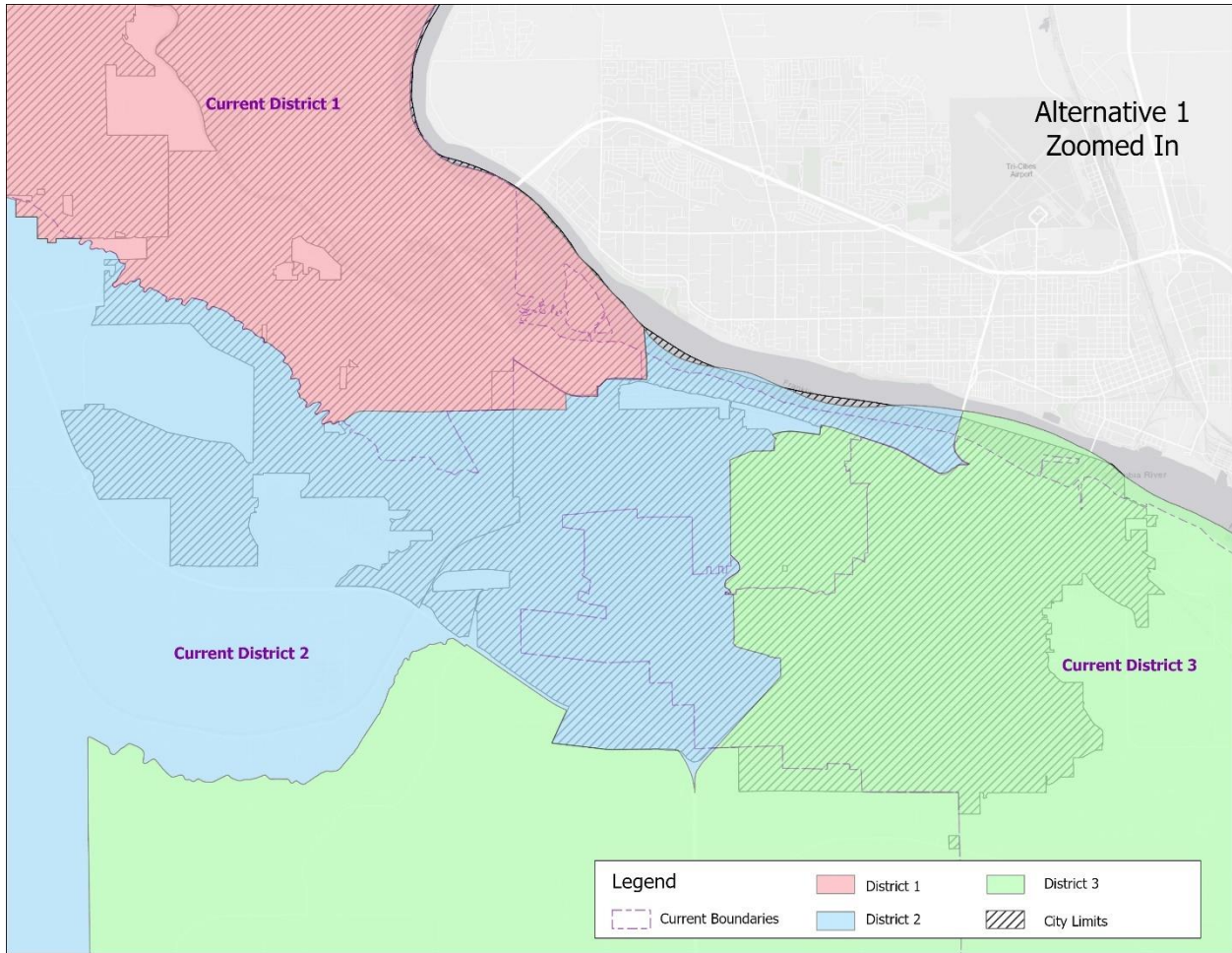


Figure 12 – 2022-2031 Alternative 2

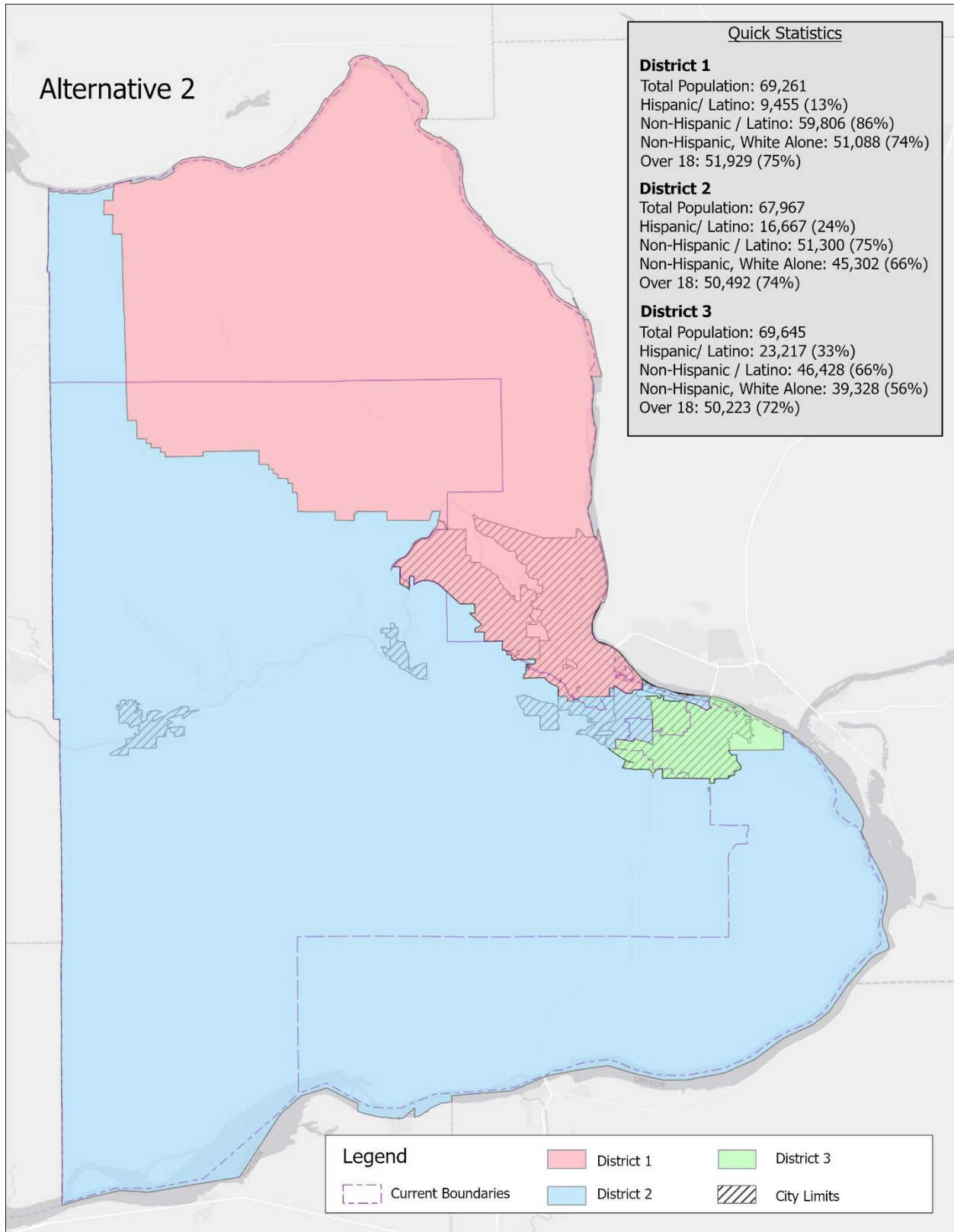


Figure 13 – 2022-2031 Alternative 3

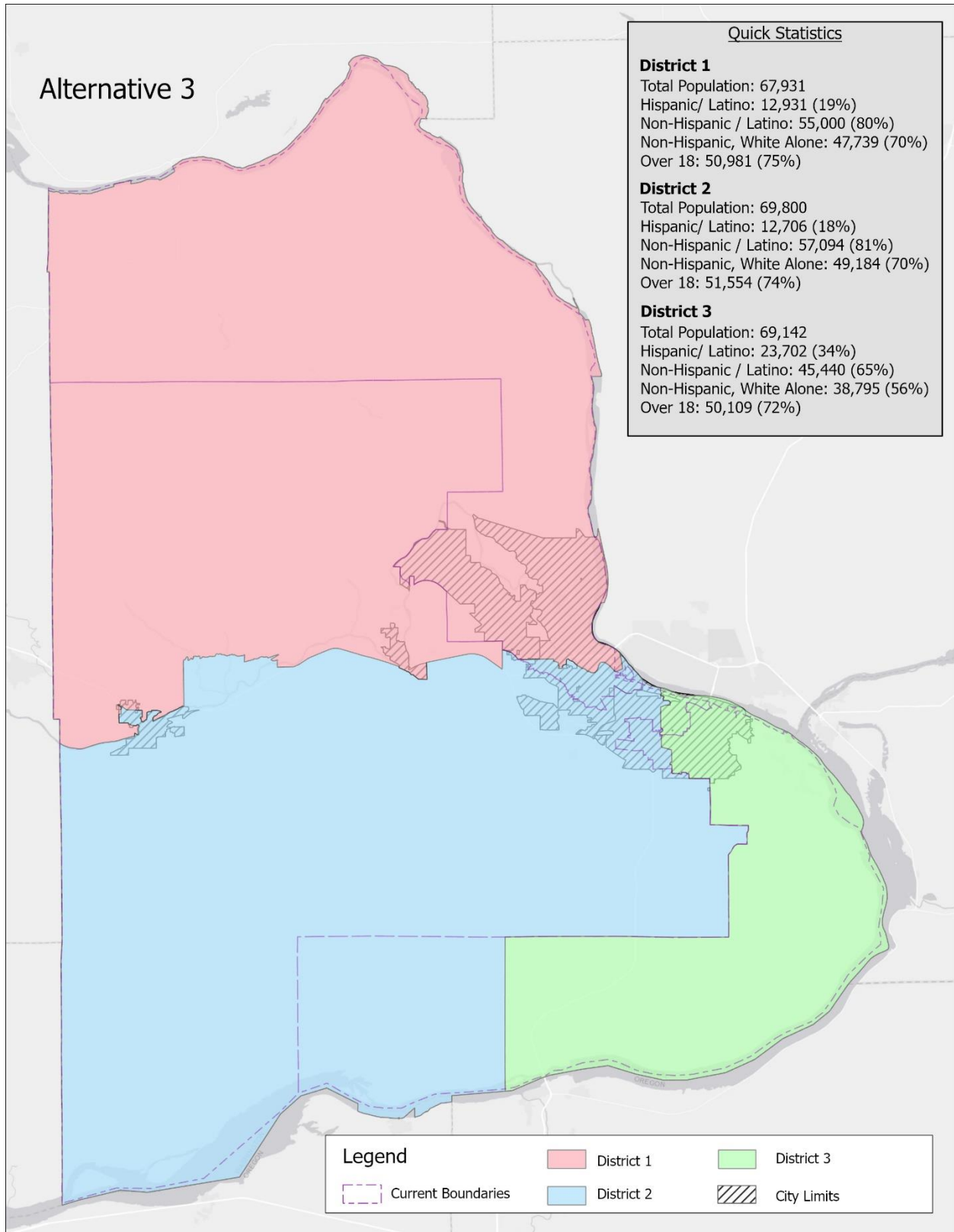


Figure 14 – 2020 Census Race & Ethnicity Outtake

