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Lessons Learned from the Michigan Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission (MICRC)

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Background

In 2018, Michigan voters approved a constitutional amendment via statewide ballot initiative that shifted the responsibility for drawing Michigan's congressional and state legislative districts from the Michigan Legislature to a newly-formed Michigan Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission. This marked a new approach to redistricting in the state, maximizing public input and for the first time in Michigan, and incorporating communities of interest (COIs) as a criterion in map drawing. Beginning in 2020, the bipartisan commission solicited public comments before drawing Michigan's new districts.

The Commission adopted its first set of maps in December 2021, which were used in the 2022 elections. However, on December 21, 2023, a federal court ordered the Commission to redraw 13 Detroit-area districts in the Michigan House and Senate maps, after finding they used race as a predominant factor while redistricting, which violates the equal protection clause in the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Prior to beginning the remedial phase of the remapping effort, three commissioners stepped down from their positions, two Democrats and one Republican. In their place, three new commissioners were chosen via the state's random selection process: Commissioner Elaine Andrade (D), Commissioner Donna Callaghan (D), and Commissioner Marcus Muldoon (R).

<u>House Remapping</u>
Beginning in January 2024, the Commission met to redraw seven State House districts (1, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, and 14) according to the court's instruction. Across a series of meetings, the Commission drew numerous draft maps and received extensive public comment throughout the process including via the Commission's online portals and at regular map drawing sessions, as well as at Town Halls and Public Hearings in February specifically held for eliciting feedback. After voting on 10 drafted maps, the final agreed upon map, "Motown Sound FC E1," received bipartisan support from 10 of the 13 commissioners after two rounds of voting. The Commission

submitted this remedial State House plan to the court by its March 1, 2024, deadline, and the new State House map was approved by the court on March 27, 2024.

Senate Remapping

The Commission was ordered to redraw six State Senate districts (1, 3, 6, 8, 10, and 11) in the metro Detroit area. Beginning in April 2024, the Commission held several meetings where they drew maps together. Additionally, they held six public hearings where the Commission listened to live public comments. The public was also able to submit public comments through an online portal as well as a mapping portal. As part of this process, the Commission sought help from the University of Michigan's Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) for managing, analyzing, and reporting on the public input, leading to the creation of a unified database of public comments for the first time. In total, the Commission received 1,680 public comments regarding the draft Senate maps. Throughout the process, the Commission drafted 12 maps. Over the course of two days, the Commission voted on the 12 proposed maps. After five unsuccessful voting rounds to secure the support required to send a map to the court, the Commission transitioned to ranked-choice voting. In the end, the Commission approved the "Crane A1" map and submitted it to the District Court on June 27, 2024. The Federal court approved the new state Senate map on July 26, 2024.

This report serves as documentation of the lessons learned in the remedial phases of the State House and Senate remapping process and is intended to help future citizen redistricting commissions in Michigan and other states to further improve upon citizen redistricting approaches.

Lessons Learned - MICRC Interviews

Upon finishing the remedial remapping for both the House and Senate districts, commissioners and staff were given the opportunity to provide feedback through structured interviews with CLOSUP. In total, 15 interviews were conducted. These interviews will be archived at the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library and will be accessible to all stakeholders interested in Michigan's new approach to redistricting. The following is a summary of the reflections and recommendations gathered from these interviews that covered a broad range of topics as outlined below, including the things they are most proud of, the training and resources provided to them, the Commission's organizational and leadership structure, public input and issues of COIs, the map drawing process, and more.

What MICRC Personnel are Most Proud of
Key findings:
- **Pride and Achievements:** Collaboratively created fair maps for Michigan despite challenges like COVID-19 and diverse backgrounds of commissioners.

- **Dedication to Democracy:** Played a key role in giving the public a voice in government, exceeding public comment expectations.
- **Rewarding Experience:** Impactful and rewarding process contributing to a fairer and more just redistricting process for Michigan.

Commissioners expressed immense pride in their achievements while serving on the Michigan Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission. They highlighted their success in creating effective and fair maps for Michigan, overcoming significant challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, diverse political backgrounds, and initial lack of redistricting knowledge. The collaborative effort among diverse and previously unacquainted members was a major point of pride, as commissioners felt they managed to work together, fostering collegial discussions and following constitutional guidelines to ensure the public's voice was heard and incorporated into the final maps. Many commissioners also felt a deep sense of satisfaction in completing their tasks and having the maps accepted by the courts, proving skeptics wrong and significantly improving Michigan's representation.

Additionally, commissioners took pride in their dedication to the democratic process and the important role they played in giving the public a voice in government. They successfully received over 30,000 public comments throughout the entire redistricting process that began in 2020, far exceeding expectations given Michigan's size, despite operating with limited finances and having to navigate funding challenges. Commissioners valued the team effort in maximizing partnerships with organizations across the state and believed strongly in the systemic impact of their work, fostering a sense of importance in allowing everyday Michigan residents to be heard. Overall, they saw their experience as a rewarding opportunity to serve the citizens of Michigan and to contribute to a fairer and more just redistricting process.

Training and Resources Provided to Commissioners
Key findings:
- **Training Seen as Valuable:** The provided training and hands-on practice were very useful and needed.
- **Request for More Training:** Additional technical and general training in-person would be beneficial.

The Commissioners received a large packet of reading materials and initial training sessions at the launch of the MICRC in fall, 2020, along with additional training sessions later in the process, from a variety of experts. Commissioners and staff generally found the training and resources provided valuable but identified areas for improvement. They appreciated the webinars, Zoom sessions, and continuous reminders which were helpful, but felt in-person training could have built more trust. Commissioners said that insights from Arizona and California citizen-commissioners from the 2010 redistricting process proved beneficial in setting

expectations, and the support from someone familiar with state government was crucial for navigating bureaucratic complexities of state government. Many also felt that comprehensive materials, recordings, and reports were useful, but some found the volume and timing overwhelming, suggesting that earlier and more concise training would have been beneficial.

Many felt that additional technical training, particularly on mapping, GIS tools, and public outreach would have enhanced their understanding. Repeated presentations and hands-on practice with experts and mapping software were highlighted as particularly valuable. Additionally, there were requests for more general training on sustainable group dynamics, addressing biases, and navigating political spaces. Overall, while most saw the training as largely adequate, there were suggestions for more in-depth, organized, and earlier training to better prepare future commissioners.

Commission Organization, Leadership, and Operations
Key findings:
- **Operational Efficiency Enhancements:** Suggestions to enhance administrative support, including additional state government experts, dedicated finance and procurement positions on the MICRC staff itself, and outsourcing specialized services.
- **Leadership Structure and Clarity:** Leadership was effective, but clearer role definitions and decision-making authority is needed; consider longer terms for strong leaders and ensure balanced committee structures.
- **Commitment to Transparency:** Transparency was strong, through recorded meetings and public decision-making, but emphasis on understanding and improving information management for public input.
- **Ethical Conduct and Integrity:** Ethical conduct was generally well managed, but a need for robust enforcement mechanisms to maintain integrity and accountability.

Commissioners and staff generally appreciated the support and resources provided to them but recognized opportunities for improvement. They identified that adding more administrative support, like part-time assistants or executive support, could help manage scheduling, coordination, meeting and event logistics, and improve work-life balance, as the very small staff was often overworked. Some suggested including staff with expertise in state government operations to navigate the complexities more efficiently. Additionally, some commissioners felt that procuring dedicated staff positions for finance and procurement would streamline operations and ensure better contract management and financial reporting. Outsourcing certain services, like legal counsel, to specialized consultants rather than having counsel on staff – and potentially having multiple legal representatives to present differing opinions – was also recommended for more nuanced advice.

Leadership within the Commission was largely viewed as effective, with the chair and vice-chair roles facilitating meetings well. However, some reported a need for clearer role definitions and

decision-making authority to ensure everyone understood their responsibilities. Most commissioners felt that the rotation of these positions every six months worked well, but some suggested the Commission could benefit from longer terms for particularly well-suited leaders. Meanwhile, sub-committees formed for special purposes such as initial work in hiring staff and vendors, were deemed effective in streamlining decisions and reducing debates. The committees were structured to include one Democrat, one Republican, and one Independent, and this was viewed positively as well. The number of sub-committees utilized was generally viewed positively, with no significant need to increase the amount of work done by sub-committees. Ensuring balance and fairness in leadership and committee roles was seen as crucial for future commissions.

Transparency was viewed as a strong point for the Commission, with all meetings live-streamed and recorded, shared on YouTube, and decisions made in public view. Commissioners emphasized the importance of all commissioners understanding the concept of transparency, especially in legal matters. Many felt that public access to extensive meeting minutes and reports further highlighted the commission's commitment to openness. Going forward, commissioners suggested that improving information management and summaries, particularly regarding public input, could make the process more accessible to the public and commissioners alike.

Ethical conduct within the commission was generally viewed as well-managed, with an appropriate code of conduct in place, though numerous commissioners mentioned a need for better enforcement mechanisms. Most commissioners felt that ethical guidelines were adhered to with good intentions, but occasional personality conflicts, and alleged code of conduct violations and potential conflicts of interest were noted. Addressing these through a robust code of conduct and potentially involving external enforcement mechanisms was suggested to help maintain integrity, though there was little agreement on exactly what types of enforcement mechanisms would be appropriate. Overall, commissioners and staff felt that the Commission worked with integrity and focused on doing the right thing, ensuring accountability and transparency in their work.

Public Input
Key findings:
- **Effectiveness of Public Engagement:** In-person public hearings offered deeper insights and genuine interactions, while emails and written comments often felt repetitive.
- **Challenges in Managing Feedback:** The high volume of comments was difficult to manage; suggested hiring additional staff, using AI tools, and seeking support from external consultants for better organization and synthesis, following the model developed by CLOSUP during the Senate remapping phase.
- **Mixed Reviews on Public-Submitted Maps:** Publicly-submitted maps provided useful ideas but were challenging to integrate due to software incompatibility; preference

identified for open-source tools and AI to improve transparency and streamline the process.

Commissioners and staff generally found the public input process valuable and helpful in guiding their decision-making. Most saw the public hearings and in-person engagement as particularly effective, offering a deeper understanding of public sentiment and allowing commissioners to ask follow-up questions. While emails and written comments often felt repetitive, the in-person interactions were viewed as more genuine and impactful.

However, managing the high volume of comments remained challenging, a point that was highlighted in the Commission's original "Lessons Learned" report, published in October 2022, when the commissioners suggested future commissions should hire additional help for managing and analyzing public input. Many commissioners found it difficult to review all comments on a timely basis. The support of external consultants or additional staff was recommended again by numerous commissioners after the remedial mapping efforts in spring 2024. There was a consensus that hiring more staff or utilizing AI tools could improve the organization and synthesis of public input, making it easier to handle the large volume of feedback effectively. The model developed by CLOSUP during the Senate remapping process to aggregate all comments into a single database, regardless of which input path was used (direct comments, emails, portal submissions, etc.), and to summarize the public comments by common themes was viewed as helpful and something the next MICRC should pursue and develop further.

The ability for residents to submit maps through the web portal had mixed reviews. Some commissioners found public-submitted maps beneficial for providing ideas and specific district preferences, while others struggled with the process due to the inability to integrate these maps with the commission's own mapping software. There was a preference for using open-source tools to improve transparency and ease of use.

Communities of Interest (COIs)
Key findings:
- **Effective Handling of COIs:** COIs were effectively prioritized using constitutional legislation, but challenges were encountered regarding conflicting viewpoints and self-identified COIs.
- **Recommendations for Future Processes:** Emphasized clear identification of COIs with specific markers, detailed submissions, and the creation of a database for better organization. Suggested continuous public training and educational outreach to help COIs advocate effectively.
- **Importance of In-Person Engagement:** In-person comments were seen as more genuine and impactful, aiding understanding of community needs. COIs should be specific and

passionate, avoid repetitive scripts, and provide clear reasons for their recognition and accommodation.

Commissioners generally felt that the Commission did a commendable job in dealing with Communities of Interest (COIs). They emphasized the importance of public comments in identifying COIs and the need for discernment among competing inputs. Commissioners and staff said that constitutional legislation provided a strong framework for prioritizing COI input, helping to give organized Michiganders a voice. However, commissioners acknowledged challenges such as conflicting viewpoints from different areas and the difficulty of defining and weighting COIs.

Several commissioners noted that the process of balancing COIs with other constitutional priorities was crucial and challenging. They recommended that COIs present legitimate reasons for their political representation needs rather than simply claiming unity. Clear identification and definition of COIs with specific geographical markers were advised, along with detailed submissions outlining population areas, schools, churches, and other community features. Commissioners suggested creating a database or repository to organize COI input better and emphasized the need for more methodical and collective documentation.

The importance for COI representatives of attending the Commission's public hearings and engaging in person was highlighted as a significant factor in understanding and addressing COIs. In-person comments were considered more genuine and impactful, helping commissioners grasp the specific needs and concerns of different communities. To make COIs more effective in future processes, commissioners advised that COI members be specific and passionate when voicing opinions, avoid repetitive scripts, and provide clear reasons for the recognition and accommodation of their COIs.

While the Commission's handling of COIs was generally praised, there were suggestions for improvement. The need for a balanced and hospitable process to manage biases and enhance trust was recognized. Commissioners advocated for continuous public training and educational outreach to help COIs understand how to best advocate for themselves effectively. Overall, the commission aimed to keep impactful communities together, recognizing the critical role COIs now play in the redistricting process.

Map Drawing
Key findings:
- **Initiating Mapping in Key Areas:** Start mapping in densely populated regions like Detroit and Southeast Michigan to address complex areas first and use local knowledge.
- **Data and Software Usability:** Ensure mapping software and data are user-friendly, accessible, and available from the start of the mapping work. Mixed views on considering

a hybrid approach with independent experts drafting initial maps to be further modified by the commissioners themselves.

- **Training and Collaboration:** Provide more comprehensive and earlier training, with a focus on in-person collaboration and continuous training sessions to build efficiency and relationships.
- **Balancing Participation and Expertise:** Mixed views on allowing commissioners to pass on drawing unfamiliar areas and on relying more on professional map drawers to streamline the process. Address issues like jumping between mapping areas or versions of maps, and managing data volumes.

The Commission adopted a round-robin approach to map drawing, with each commissioner provided with opportunities to draw districts before handing off that responsibility to the next commissioner in line. Commissioners had varied opinions on this mapping process and suggested several improvements for future commissions. Starting the mapping work in densely populated areas like Detroit and Southeast Michigan was a common recommendation, highlighting the importance of addressing the most complex areas first and leveraging local knowledge. There was an acknowledgment of the challenges posed by the round robin mapping method. Some commissioners thought that members should not be allowed to "pass" on their opportunity to draw districts, while others thought it was acceptable to decline one's opportunity. There was more consensus that it would be helpful to maintain a sustained focus on one map type and/or region at a time when handing off mapping direction from one commissioner to another, for better continuity and effectiveness.

The use of data such as partisan vote history and demographic data during the mapping process was another critical area of discussion. Many commissioners found the mapping software and data useful but suggested that it needed to be more user-friendly and accessible to ensure effective use by all commissioners. They emphasized the importance of having all necessary data, such as voter partisanship and racial demographics, available from the start of map drawing efforts, to avoid frustrating revisions as was required by this Commission at various points when data were not initially available. Some commissioners noted the benefit of leaning more on the expertise of mapping consultants and considered a hybrid approach where independent experts draft initial maps for review and refinement based on community feedback, while most felt strongly that only commissioners should have a direct role in setting district lines.

Training and data understanding played significant roles in the mapping process. Commissioners appreciated the help from support staff in explaining complex data but felt that additional training and earlier access to all data would have been beneficial. There was a consensus that in-person collaboration could enhance efficiency and relationship building, which was hindered by the necessity of Zoom meetings due to COVID-19 and health-driven needs from some commissioners. Commissioners suggested starting the commissioner map-drawing training

earlier in the cycle to better prepare for the work ahead and utilizing continuous training sessions to ensure everyone remained on the same page.

Overall, while the collaborative mapping process was deemed effective, it was also described as challenging. Commissioners recognized the value of balancing participation and expertise, with some recommending that more reliance on professional map drawers could have streamlined the process. They also highlighted the importance of addressing issues such as jumping between mapping areas (different regions of the state) or map versions and managing overwhelming data volumes to improve the mapping process for future commissions. Despite the challenges, the commissioners' cohesive effort and leadership were praised.

Replacing Commissioners Mid-Process
Key findings:
- **Effective Orientation:** Recommendations included crash courses in necessary software, clear instructions, and meetings with key leaders.
- **Continuous Support:** Emphasized the need for ongoing support from fellow commissioners and staff, with the ability to review past meetings.

Onboarding new commissioners after the Commission's work began presented various challenges and opportunities for improvement. Overall, the replacement process, which followed the constitutional amendment, was viewed as effective. The need for thorough orientation was widely recognized, with suggestions for providing a crash course in necessary software and ensuring new members receive clear and timely instructions. Meetings with experts, the chair, executive director, and vice-chair were deemed crucial for setting expectations and answering questions, helping new commissioners become effective participants quickly. While some new members felt overwhelmed initially, support from fellow commissioners and staff helped them navigate the complexities. Continuous support and the ability to review past meetings, although impractical to expect fully, were also suggested to ease the transition. Implementing these suggestions can help to ensure new commissioners are well-prepared and can contribute effectively to the Commission's ongoing work.

Overall Challenges
Key findings:
- **Building Trust and Team Cohesion:** Establishing trust among commissioners, staff, and the public was crucial, with in-person meetings and robust personal relationships facilitating better teamwork and understanding compared with remote participation.
- **Logistical and Scheduling Challenges:** Extensive travel, managing conflicting public input, and the delayed census caused scheduling difficulties.
- **Addressing Inexperience and Providing Support:** Steep learning curve on the technicalities and nuances of the redistricting process; recommended building a positive

work environment, prompt hiring of staff, and improved protection and support for commissioners.
- **Insufficient and Delayed Funding:** Funding challenges were noted, including the limited budget compared with other states' independent commissions, and delays in funding decisions.

The commissioners reported facing several significant challenges beyond the COVID pandemic, one of the foremost being the task of building trust among themselves, the staff, and the public. Navigating the challenge of diverse personalities and backgrounds within the Commission and establishing trust was crucial. Many commissioners found in-person meetings more effective for communication and collaboration than virtual meetings, which were supported mainly during bad weather and peak COVID periods. Additionally, the need for intentional social interactions and robust personal relationships was emphasized as these interactions were seen to facilitate better teamwork and understanding among commissioners. Some commissioners felt that personal attacks and public scrutiny experienced by some commissioners highlighted the need for improved protection and support within the Commission.

Moreover, some commissioners felt that the lack of redistricting experience – including with the mapping software, legal considerations such as the Voting Rights Act, the details of Michigan's demographics, and more – among commissioners and the varying levels of understanding led to frustration and resentment. Building a positive work environment, ensuring in-person attendance when possible, hiring staff promptly, and emphasizing the importance of human interaction were all reported as ways to improve future commissions' effectiveness. In terms of logistical challenges, some reported that extensive travel led to exhaustion and that managing a large volume of conflicting public input was often difficult. Another substantial challenge identified was the delay of the census due to the COVID pandemic, which impacted the commission's timeline and data availability and led to persistent scheduling issues.

Funding challenges were noted. First, too little funding was provided by the state legislature compared with independent commissions in other states. In addition, delays in funding decisions by the state legislature in the appropriations process presented numerous ongoing challenges for the Commission's continuity of operations.

Most Helpful Factors
Key findings:
- **Support from Staff and Experts:** Knowledgeable staff played a crucial role in navigating challenges and handling logistics, allowing commissioners to focus on primary responsibilities.
- **Building Relationships and Camaraderie:** In-person meetings, social interactions, and informal gatherings fostered friendships and helped to create a cohesive unit.

- **Value of Public Engagement:** Public comments and community feedback were seen as incredibly valuable and a crucial part of the process.

The commissioners found various factors helpful in fulfilling their roles, with a strong emphasis on support from fellow commissioners, staff, and experts. Many highlighted the crucial role of knowledgeable staff, like Executive Director Edward Woods III and staff from the Michigan Department of State, in navigating new challenges and maintaining direction. The assistance in handling logistical issues and administrative tasks was particularly valued, as it allowed commissioners to focus on their primary responsibilities without distraction. Experts on redistricting and the Voting Rights Act were seen as providing enlightening insights, even if not all opinions were universally accepted, reinforcing the importance of diverse perspectives in decision-making.

Building relationships and maintaining a sense of camaraderie were also pivotal for the commissioners. In-person meetings were reported as particularly effective for fostering friendships and supporting each other during tense moments. The social interactions, including dinners and informal gatherings, were seen as helping to create a cohesive unit and to mitigate the stress of being in the public eye. Commissioners valued the dedication and good faith efforts of their peers, learning from each other despite differing opinions. Additionally, public comments were seen as incredibly valuable, with commissioners appreciating the engagement and feedback from the community, considering public input a crucial part of the process. Overall, the sense of duty, teamwork, and mutual respect among commissioners and staff contributed significantly to their successful collaboration.

Recommendations for Improvement
Key findings:
- **Transparency and Public Trust:** Make mapping software public and open-source to improve transparency and trust.
- **In-Person Collaboration:** Need for in-person meetings to foster relationships and collaboration, which virtual meetings cannot replicate. Ensure all commissioners can attend in person for better respect and understanding.
- **Geographic and Democratic Representation:** Improve geographic diversity within the Commission, including better representation from underrepresented areas.
- **Operational Improvements:** Address funding issues and align timing with Commission needs. Improve financial operations with more staff support and institutionalize the aggregation and management of public comments to enhance overall efficiency and effectiveness.

Commissioners and staff provided several key suggestions for improving the Commission's processes and structure. One major recommendation was to make the mapping software as public

and open-source as possible to enhance transparency and public trust. Additionally, many emphasized the importance of in-person meetings for building relationships and fostering effective collaboration, which virtual meetings could not replicate. Ensuring all Commissioners are present in person was highlighted as crucial for maintaining respect and understanding among members. There was also a call for clearer expectations of commissioner responsibilities in the original application to avoid future issues.

Although commissioners were chosen in a random process that weighted Michigan's regional population to produce a commission reflecting the state's geographic makeup, numerous commissioners felt the geographic representation was not adequate. As such, another significant suggestion was to address the geographic diversity within the Commission, ensuring representation from underrepresented areas like the Upper Peninsula, Grand Rapids, and northern Michigan.

Some commissioners also desired stricter limits on partisan fairness in the chosen maps, feeling that more could have been done to ensure partisan fairness, although others noted that COIs are ranked higher than partisan fairness in the Constitutional requirements, and thus felt that partisan fairness was handled appropriately. Meanwhile, some proposed changing the process to allow public voting on proposed maps for greater democratic accountability.

Addressing inadequate funding and aligning the timing of funding with the commission's needs to reduce dependency on the legislative schedule was also recommended, as delayed funding decisions by the state introduced ongoing challenges for the Commission's work.

Strengthening interpersonal relationships, institutionalizing the aggregation and analysis of public comments, and improving financial operations were seen as essential steps to enhance the commission's efficiency and effectiveness in future iterations.

Advice to Future Commissions
Key findings:
- **Collaboration and Continuous Learning:** Emphasize dedication, bonding, in-person meetings, and reviewing archived work to learn from past commissions.
- **Valuing Citizen Input and Preparedness:** Maintain the human element, value citizen input, be prepared for complexities, and strive for continuous improvement.
- **Build On Current Plans:** Rather than starting from scratch, commissioners emphasized that future commissions should build on what has already been created by this inaugural MICRC.

Commissioners offered valuable advice for future commissions, emphasizing the importance of dedication, collaboration, and continuous learning. They encouraged future commissioners to

bond with each other and face challenges head-on, recognizing the experience as rewarding and worthwhile. The significance of meeting in person to facilitate effective collaboration and understanding was highlighted, as was the value of thoroughly reviewing the archived work of previous commissions to learn from their successes and mistakes. Future commissioners were urged to maintain the human element in the redistricting process, valuing citizen input and engagement, and to be prepared for the complexities and criticisms that come with the role. Additionally, while this commission had to start planning from scratch, commissioners urged future commissions to build on what has now already been created. Overall, commissioners hoped that future commissions would consist of similarly dedicated and invested individuals, capable of building on the foundation laid by their predecessors while continuously striving for improvement.

Public Comment Recommendations from CLOSUP

In May 2024, the Commission hired a team of researchers at the Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy (CLOSUP) at the University of Michigan to support the redrawing process by systematically aggregating, managing, analyzing, and presenting findings on the extensive public comments submitted to the MICRC. Additionally, the team highlighted the following recommendations on collecting, analyzing, and reporting on public comment for future independent redistricting commissions. These suggestions aim to enhance the accuracy and efficiency of public comment collection and incorporation, ensuring that redistricting decisions are well-informed and truly representative of public opinion. These recommendations are designed to streamline the public input process, maximize the value of collected data, and improve transparency and accountability.

By implementing these recommendations, future redistricting commissions can better fulfill their mandate of creating fair and representative electoral maps while effectively engaging the public throughout the process.

Maintain a "Bottom-Up" COI Approach

Based on the relevant research from other independent redistricting commissions, the MICRC's bottom-up approach is the most effective means of incorporating authentic public input and COIs into the redistricting process. A bottom-up approach, based on direct input from COI representatives, is the best means to actually protect COIs and avoid ad-hoc and uneven redistricting. However, the approach is likely to be resource and time intensive. The organization and review of thousands of public comments requires adequate staffing, as commissioners generally do not have the time or capacity to review and recall all of the submitted comments.

Even with a capable staff, the flood of comments requires summarizing. We recommend a memo-style, "thematic" approach to COIs: reviewing staff should 1) individually analyze and categorize each public COI comment and 2) present key trends synthesizing the most prevalent

themes that emerge from the data. The approach should mirror or build upon the CLOSUP team's May 20, 2024, COI memo (attached here as an appendix), in which the CLOSUP team individually reviewed each public comment, but presented summaries to the commission highlighting the most important trends and takeaways. This ensures a community-driven, bottom-up approach, while still ensuring that commissioners are not spending too much time wading through public comments. Organizing these comments could be expedited by using AI, but the initial review of each comment should still receive a human reviewer to ensure accuracy.

Encourage Specificity and Sufficiency in Public Comments
The most valuable public comments are those that are specific, providing succinct context and sufficient justification for their opinions. However, some comments often either lack context or include an overload of information. While receiving live public comments during public hearings during the Michigan re-mapping process, MICRC Commissioners often engaged commenters with follow-up questions. This was effective in eliciting deeper justifications and necessary context when needed and allowed for more accurate analysis of these public comments.

To build on this approach, commissions can implement more proactive tools. When submitting public comments, whether in-person or through an online portal, commenters should be required to complete an accompanying online form requiring more detailed information such as contact information, region, geographic boundaries of their COI, additional information regarding the substantive issues that define their COI, and reasons their COI requires legislative protection. This approach will ensure that commenters provide the necessary justification for their feedback, resulting in more consistent and valuable input. Commission staff may need to provide support to residents who wish to submit their views but struggle with a more demanding and detailed interface to the Commission.

Commissions could also consider providing example comments on their comment portals, pointing to key features of effective input, such as clarity, context, and justification. By highlighting high-quality comments, commissions can guide the public toward providing input that leads to more informed and representative redistricting decisions.

Build a Flexible and Responsive Codebook
A well-structured, adaptable codebook is critical for effectively categorizing, organizing and analyzing public comments. Staff members should begin with a foundational framework that includes a basic set of comment categories relevant to redistricting such as Region, Communities of Interest, and Process-specific comments, which will guide the development of specific summarizing codes. Through an iterative process, staff should allow for regular reviews and updates to these categories and codes as new themes emerge from public comments. This ensures that the codebook remains relevant and supports analysis throughout the comment collection period.

The codebook should allow for multi-level coding, capturing both broad themes and specific details. "Primary codes" can be used for general categories (the code "100" might signify a comment focusing on "COIs") while "subcodes" provide more granular information (e.g. subcode code "106" could signify "African American COI"). To maintain flexibility, the codebook should use open-ended categories and "other" options. Clear definitions and real-world examples should accompany codes (in annotations, or in the margins) to ensure consistency across multiple coders.

In addition, the work of individual coders should be reviewed by other coders in a kind of "double-blind" process to ensure consistency, and when discrepancies emerge, a team leader should make final determinations on coding specific public comments.

Leverage Artificial Intelligence with Human Oversight

Artificial intelligence (AI) tools, such as ChatGPT, can enhance the efficiency and consistency of the coding process when used judiciously. A uniform codebook serves as an excellent foundation for AI-assisted coding. By providing the AI with the codebook and feeding it comments one at a time, team members can quickly generate initial code assignments for each public comment. This approach not only accelerates the coding process, but also helps team members familiarize themselves with the codes and maintain objectivity when reading comments.

However, AI should be viewed as a supportive tool rather than a replacement for human expertise. Public comments are often unique or complex, failing to fit neatly into predetermined categories. While maintaining a dynamic and expanding codebook can address this challenge, consistent human oversight and discernment is critical. Teams should implement a two-step process by which any analysis involving AI is subsequently checked over with a human review, to catch errors and misunderstandings.

Implement Transparent and Frequent Reporting

Public comments should be analyzed and presented to the commission at multiple stages throughout the redistricting process, rather than just at the conclusion of public comment collection. Aides should segment the comments into phases and produce a memo for each phase. This approach allows for the analysis to evolve in response to the changing dynamics of redistricting. CLOSUP's two memos (both attached here as appendices) from the Senate remapping phase in 2024 exemplify how the focus of the redistricting discussion shifts over time, necessitating corresponding adjustments in the analysis. Depending on the specifics of a state's process, additional memos may be necessary. Each memo should be presented to the commission to facilitate questions and discussion.

Conclusion

Many lessons were learned by Michigan's commissioners and their staff throughout the inaugural redistricting process utilizing the state's new approach to redistricting via the MICRC, most of which have been documented in the Commission's original "lessons learned" report. Following the remedial court-imposed mapping efforts in spring, 2024, additional lessons were identified via structured interviews with the commissioners and their staff, as well as by CLOSUP staff who assisted the MICRC with management and analysis of public input for the first time during the state senate re-mapping work.

Highlights that stand out from those lessons include the importance of in-person attendance by commissioners in order to build relationships and a greater sense of cohesion on the Commission; a need for more staff and vendor support and therefore also for increased funding and faster state government decisions on supplemental funding requests; a need for additional training, tailored to the specific commissioners' needs; a need to further improve public input processes, particularly including the management, analysis, and reporting on public comments; and opportunities to improve the actual map-drawing approach and processes. Numerous additional lessons and suggestions as described throughout this report were identified through the structured interviews following the court's approval of the MICRC's final maps for the state house and senate.

Michigan's first set of citizen redistricting commissioners are particularly proud of their commitment to transparency, their ability to produce maps that were significantly better than pre-existing maps created by the state legislature, and how they valued and attempted to maximize public engagement and input. They encourage future commissioners to build a sense of team amongst themselves, to build upon the successes and approaches established by this inaugural Commission while looking for opportunities to make further improvements, and to keep the human element front and center during their public service.

Appendices

CLOSUP Memo 1
CLOSUP Memo 2
CLOSUP Memo 3