

Convicted man tried in two more killings. **B2**

Official in spat over parking reassigned. **B3**

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LAURENCE KESTERSON / Staff Photographer

St. Rocco's in Avondale during the dedication Tuesday. The church will serve a Spanish-speaking community that had been attending five area parishes.

Council hopes for new map in Sept.

At a redistricting hearing, President Anna C. Verna said a plan could be passed by Sept. 22 "if all goes well."

By Troy Graham and Bob Warner
INQUIRER STAFF WRITERS

Despite a precedence of acrimony and blown deadlines, City Council members say they believe they can complete the once-a-decade task of redrawing Philadelphia's political map in less than a month.

At the start of Council's first public hearing on the matter Tuesday, President Anna C. Verna predicted an ordinance to reset the districts and account for population shifts would be introduced Sept. 8.

After a hearing, redistricting could be passed Sept. 22 "if all goes well," she said.

The question is how much impact the public will have on a process that has been driven in the past by some less-than-noble political influences.

Council has not revealed any proposed new boundaries for the city's 10 districts, and the members could not say whether maps would be available before Sept. 8.

"I don't know. I can't tell you that," said Majority Leader Marian B. Tasco, one of five Council members on a committee exploring redistricting options. "I will tell you we're not fighting. We're not yelling at each other."

The real negotiating over redistricting has been happening in Verna's office, where individual Council members are having private sessions this week with a team of staff members led by senior counsel Eric H. Auerbach.

Councilwoman Maria Quiñones-Sánchez said the staff members had developed a "potential map" of new Council districts, but they were waiting for more input from the members who would have areas added to or subtracted from their districts.

Councilman Curtis Jones, who met with Auerbach's group Tuesday afternoon, said he had been shown

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Place to worship their language

Nineteen years after the Archdiocese of Philadelphia opened a mission for Hispanic Catholics in southern Chester County, Cardinal Justin Rigali dedicated a new parish Tuesday in Avondale to serve a congregation that has burgeoned to 12,000. With a Mexican-style church that seats 500, St. Rocco's consolidates the primarily immigrant community that had been attending Mass and

receiving sacraments at five area parishes. The center will continue the work of Mission Santa Maria, Madre de Dios, which in 1992 began serving Spanish-speaking farmworkers. Msgr. Francis Depman, St. Rocco's pastor and founder of the mission, will lead the parish, whose members are mostly Mexican, with a Puerto Rican, Argentine, and Colombian presence.

— David O'Reilly



Districts

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maps with a couple of different options for his future district. "It's like a big jigsaw puzzle that has variations," he said.

He said that he intended to talk to his neighboring Council members and that "we're down to subtleties now as opposed to the big picture."

Council must redraw the districts every 10 years after the census so each one can have as close to the same number of residents as possible.

While always a thorny process, redistricting was thought to be especially challenging this year because of the way the city's population has shifted.

Since the 2000 census, four districts in the western part of the city shrank, while three in the eastern part grew.

"This means that redistricting cannot be accomplished simply by tweaking a few voting districts here and there," Verna said Tuesday. "Some significant redrawing of the map is inevitable."

Based on an overall population of 1.5 million, each district should have about 152,600 people. Courts have held there should not be more than a 10 percent variation between the largest and smallest districts — about 15,000.

Currently, there is a differ-

ence of nearly 29,000 people between the district that shrank the most, the Eighth in Northwest Philadelphia, and the one that grew the most, the First, which stretches along the Delaware River from South Philadelphia to Port Richmond.

Mayor Nutter's chief of staff, Suzanne Biemiller, urged Council on Tuesday to keep the variation to less than 5 percent, or about 7,500 people.

She also asked Council to "slay the gerrymander," referring to the tortured composition of Councilman Darrell L. Clarke's Fifth District and Quiñones-Sánchez's Seventh District.

The Seventh corkscrews from lower North Philadelphia, where it captures the heart of the Latino community, through Northeast Philadelphia.

Members of Latino Lines, a nonpartisan "redistricting coalition," urged Council on Tuesday to make the district more compact and more Latino.

"For too long the Latino community has been gerrymandered, diluting its voting strength," said Jose Oyola, with the National Congress for Puerto Rican Rights. He said the district, which is now half Latino, should be 60 percent Hispanic.

Twelve people testified at Tuesday's hearing, which lasted less than an hour.

If redistricting is not completed by Sept. 9, Council members will not be paid. Council

missed the deadline and went without pay in 1991 and 2001.

Because of Council's biweekly pay schedule, members would not miss a paycheck if redistricting passed Sept. 22, as Verna anticipated.

The newly drawn district map would not go into effect until 2015 and the next Council election.

Advocacy groups such as the Committee of Seventy and the Philadelphia chapter of the NAACP have urged transparency in redistricting, suggesting that proposed changes to the districts be put on the Internet.

Council members Quiñones-Sánchez and Blondell Reynolds Brown introduced a nonbinding resolution in June calling for hearings and public input.

Tuesday's hearing was the first of three that Verna's office has scheduled — after drawing criticism for not acting fast enough and being uninterested in citizen input. Brown said she thought that "Maria and I achieved our goal" of promoting an open process, but added that "at the end of the day, the district Council people will have their way."

"They're the ones who understand the nuances of those blurred lines, down to the block," she said.

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