

Medicine Hat MP LaVar Payne has lodged an official protest to proposed constituency boundary changes which were tabled in Parliament late last year.

“They sent out the boundary changes just prior to the House rising — in fact they sent them out early for Alberta, and it really put a squeeze on to put objections in, and I put one in. I was actually very upset with the proposal, because it had no rationale at all.”

Under recommendations handed down by the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission in Ottawa, the M.D. of Taber is slated to become part of a huge new southern Alberta riding — Bow River — which in its current incarnation would stretch north-south across the interior of the province. Encompassing a vast tract of territory, which in addition to the M.D. of Taber includes the counties of Vulcan, Newell, Wheatland and parts of the counties of Kneehill and Rocky View — it will range from Three Hills in the north to Taber in the south, a distance of almost 300 kilometres.

“They talked about a number of issues, and how those boundaries should be looked at, and like communities, communities that have interest,” said Payne. “For example, Brooks in the riding is really close to Medicine Hat. People travel back and forth to doctors, and they do a lot of shopping — there’s a lot of activity going back and forth, just in those two communities — and not even in the riding. Empress, for example, another small community just north of Medicine Hat, was put into another riding, which basically puts them across the Red Deer River. Empress has always been in the riding.”

Besides the potential loss of the M.D. of Taber and the Brooks-Bassano area, both of which would be absorbed into the new Bow River riding, other big changes are being considered for the Medicine Hat constituency.

With boundaries being redrawn to follow the “Mormon Trail” all the way to Cardston and the border of Waterton Lakes National Park, this could result in two Conservative MPs — Jim Hillyer and Payne — facing off for the Medicine Hat nomination.

“One of the things they’ve said was the ‘Mormon Trail’, and that was why they did the boundary changes. But there is no relationship between Medicine Hat, which has half the population of the new riding, and Cardston, Raymond, Magrath, Stirling and Warner. And then it goes all the way around to the Waterton boundary. It makes absolutely no sense at all,” said Payne.

Based upon population levels, but intended to deliver an overall agricultural focus, the proposed Bow River riding would include the population centres of Strathmore (12,352), Brooks (10,093), Vulcan (1,836), Vauxhall (1,288), Bassano (1,282), and Chestermere (1,043).

Taber, with a population of 8,104, would be the third largest urban population centre in the riding.

Not alone in his objections, Payne has received support from a multitude of municipalities and representatives.

“I was very unhappy, and I put in an objection. I had to have it in prior to Jan. 11. I’ve actually gotten letters from a number of the communities, and from Gary Bikman (Cardston-Taber-Warner MLA), he’s put in an objection as well. He was very upset with the whole situation, on what they did, because it didn’t make any sense basically. I’ve gotten one from the Town of Taber, the M.D. of Taber, and I know there’s a number of other communities that have sent in objections. It’s baffling.”

Payne is currently unsure of the procedural hoops to be jumped through now that an official protest has been lodged.

“I suspect I’ll be called before whatever committee this will be part of and talk some more about the objection. I’m assuming that they’re going to ask me what I think they should do, and I do have some thoughts around that as well, but I haven’t finalized that.”

The rationale used by the Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission to formulate their proposed changes doesn’t bear close scrutiny, according to Payne.

“Our population is currently about 122,000, and they wanted to get them down to about 107,000 roughly. I think the new one that they put in was about 102,000. But the rationale that they used just didn’t fit with what they had outlined as to how they should be viewed. It just didn’t make any sense at all.”