

As the federal government prepares to change Canada's federal election boundaries for the first time in 10 years, an Alberta MP has raised the question: Who better to draw riding boundaries than the politicians who represent them?

Conservative Medicine Hat MP LaVar Payne believes he's found a solution to appease southern Alberta residents in light of some discontent over the recently announced federal boundary changes — a solution he presented to a special session of the Southern Alberta Council on Public Affairs in Lethbridge recently.

"We've lost, through this process, some very vibrant communities and some great people," Payne said. "I've talked with virtually all of the elected officials of those areas and built over the last four years some really great relationships. So what we're trying to do now is to make a tighter-knit community for our riding, which has interest in education, health and business, and certainly (would be) a much more manageable size for the Member of Parliament to be able to represent those constituents."

The boundary changes, tabled in Parliament late last year by a three-member Alberta Electoral Boundaries Commission, would add six new ridings and Members of Parliament in Alberta by shuffling current riding boundaries. The new boundaries, based on population, would reconfigure the Lethbridge riding to include the city of Lethbridge and the county of Lethbridge, including Coalhurst, Coaldale and Picture Butte.

The new boundaries would also lump Cardston, Raymond and Magrath in with the Medicine Hat riding, which would stretch north of Medicine Hat, skirting around Lethbridge, south to the Montana border and west nearly to Waterton Lakes National Park. Several communities currently in the Medicine Hat riding, including Brooks and Empress, would instead be part of a new riding, called Bow River, which would also include Taber and Vauxhall. The Blood Reserve and the Piikani Nation reserve would move to the new Foothills riding.

Part of the commission's mandate was to divide ridings based on an approximate population cap of 107,000.

But the changes, set to be implemented in time for the 2015 federal election, don't make much sense in consideration of communities' economic and cultural ties, Payne said. He was one of seven MPs - including Lethbridge MP Jim Hillyer - to file an official objection to the proposed changes. He's worked with other southern Alberta representatives, including Hillyer, to come up with a new proposal and is waiting to find out whether his boundary proposal will be accepted by the Parliamentary standing committee on Procedure and House Affairs, and he hopes to hear back by next month. His proposal would add the communities of Cardston, Raymond and Magrath, which the commission referred to as the "Mormon Trail," to the new riding of Bow River, along with the MD of Taber, while bringing Brooks, Empress, and the counties of Newell, Cypress and 40 Mile, back into the Medicine Hat riding that he'd like to call Badlands-Medicine

Hat-Brooks.

Payne was "very upset" with the commission's proposed new boundaries, but he's now "quite optimistic" that his proposal will be accepted.

"It's been an interesting process and I am quite hopeful that the commission will have another look at it, particularly because now the Members of Parliament have said these are maybe more appropriate areas and they still fit within the numbers. I think certainly in terms of like communities, they're a lot closer, so there's a number of positives that I see from that potential." Although the "Mormon Trail" communities would remain together under his proposal, Payne said he doesn't think electoral boundaries should be decided based on religion.

"I think the commission could have used a different terminology," he said. "I did have a number of people very upset because of the reference to religion, basically saying religion shouldn't be part of the decision in terms of the boundaries, because even today people are saying 'well then, what about the Catholics, the Evangelicals, the Lutherans?'"

"I don't think they should be aligned on the basis of religion, however, I have no objection at all to them being aligned as the County of Cardston and the County of Warner," Payne emphasized.

The federal electoral boundaries are reviewed every 10 years. The tabled changes would add 30 new ridings across Canada.