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Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee. My name is Roberta Parks and I'm President of the Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce. Thank you for the opportunity to comment today on redistricting in Illinois. I'd particularly like to welcome to Peoria those of you not from our community, and thank you for being here and conducting these important hearings.

The Peoria Area Chamber is one of the largest downstate business associations in Illinois, representing some 1,300 members who range from a Fortune 50 global leader to sole proprietors in a variety of business sectors.

Like many business groups, we take positions on public policy issues that fall along a continuum of interest to our members, some so specific as to have a direct bottom-line impact on our members' operations. Others are much broader and simply may fall under the heading of good government. It was for this latter reason that the Peoria Chamber was a proponent of the Fair Map Amendment.

We believe now as we did then – the redistricting process should be open and transparent, with ample opportunity for public input. We believe that districts should actually be compact and contiguous – and where it makes sense, follow some natural or geographic boundary. At a minimum, district lines shouldn't run down alleys or divide neighborhoods. Public consideration should prevail over political preservation.

While we recognize this philosophy may not be embraced by all, we also believe drawing legislative maps should not be left in the hands of those who stand to derive the most benefit. We have supported the formation of an outside group – individuals appointed by legislative leaders but with no direct vested interest in the outcome – to draw a new map. This would allow more time, greater public input and less political favoritism in the process. We believe it would also help restore confidence in the redistricting process and in our elected leaders.

Our effort to get that measure on the ballot fell short, but interest in a process that follows these same principles remains. We encourage the Redistricting Committee to give serious consideration to elements of the Fair Map Coalition.

But there's another reason to take a different approach to drawing a new map. In recent months, there's been no shortage of news about Illinois' fiscal woes and, in particular for groups like mine, the so-called business climate. Despite the wealth of resources that our state possesses, Illinois has not been well served by decisions made in recent years – decisions that have led our state to the edge of a fiscal abyss.

As a result, the reputation of our state has suffered – both in the eyes of those who live here and from those outside our borders. The business community witnessed this first hand as

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numerous companies – including some of our Peoria Chamber members – were approached about relocating to other states. We are beginning to see positive signs that Illinois leaders today realize the path we’ve been on is not sustainable.

To put that era behind us, we need to seize any opportunity to send a signal that it’s a new day in Illinois . . . that leaders have turned the page on the practices of the past. How we deal with redistricting could be a proof point that we are changing the way we conduct the state’s business. That’s particularly important for those who risk their capital in starting or expanding their businesses here.

How we redraw our legislative map can send a strong signal about how lawmakers want our state to be perceived and begin to restore confidence in our government. Allow me to highlight three simple steps we think would demonstrate a new way of thinking in Illinois.

First, establish a series of meetings around the state to present and review an analysis of Illinois census data and its implications, including representation in Congress. Are there population changes and demographic shifts that may not bode well for our state? What trends are emerging from the data? Where is Illinois a leader and where are we falling behind?

Second, create a more open process for drawing a new legislative map. This hearing is a good step in gathering public input. But the process shouldn’t start and end with a handful of hearings. We need to have more hearings across the state over a longer period of time, giving both urban and rural populations in different areas a chance to express their views.

Third, show us the map – not the final, but a draft. Invite and encourage citizen input. Listen to the voters. Only by previewing the map as a draft, using another round of planned hearings and comments, can we claim any transparency in a process that currently is viewed with cynicism and, at times, disdain.

We acknowledge that history and a compressed timeframe may make these steps difficult. However, technology should allow for increased transparency, broader public involvement, and faster turnaround on key inputs.

Only if we take the time and not fear breaking from the past can we convince citizens in our state – including a business community that at times is skeptical – that we are on a new path.

Thank you for your time and for coming to Peoria.

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