

# Gallot: Firm's GOP ties raise red flags

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The hiring of a Washington law firm with Republican ties to seek federal approval of new Louisiana House election districts "does not meet the smell test," a redistricting leader said Friday.

State Rep. Rick Gallot, D-Ruston, who spearheaded remap efforts, said House Speaker Jim Tucker's hiring of the law firm also "creates the appearance of impropriety" because it advised Republican lawmakers during the session.

Tucker hired Holtzman Vogel PLLC. Jill Holtzman Vogel, managing partner of the Washington, D.C. law firm, has served as chief counsel of the Republican National Committee and as a state senator in Virginia.

A lawyer from the firm advised the House Republican delegation that 29 majority-black districts would meet U.S. Justice Department approval, state Rep. Jane Smith, R-Bossier City, said at the time of the meeting. The Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus had sought 30 black-majority seats.

Tucker said he would disclose the terms of the contract, which would be paid with tax dollars, when signed.

On Friday, Tucker called Gallot's allegation "a total red herring."

Gallot is wrong about the firm working with GOP lawmakers as the House redrew its 105 election districts, therefore no conflict of interest exists, said Tucker, R-Terrytown.

Tucker said he has unilateral authority to hire the firm and did so because of a potential conflict with redistricting specialist House Clerk Butch Speer being involved with the

U.S. Justice Department filing.

Speer had testified before a House committee that it could be demonstrated that there was an opportunity to create a 30th district. He said failure to do so would send up a red flag with the Justice Department.

The House plan going to Justice contains 29 majority-black districts that Tucker proposed.

The Louisiana Legislative Black Caucus has said it will try to get the U.S. Justice Department to reject the plan because of its failure to maximize majority-minority districts.

Louisiana must get Justice Department pre-clearance of the plan under the federal Voting Rights Act. Election law changes in Louisiana are subject to Justice Department approval because of the state's history of racial discrimination in election practices and procedures.

Gallot said there is no reason for Tucker to spend taxpayer dollars for an outside law firm.

"Even if there is some problem with Butch making the submission, we have other staffers who are more than qualified to prepare and submit it," Gallot said.

But Tucker said House staffers who would be qualified to submit the House plan could be in the same situation as Speer if a lawsuit was filed because they would be called to testify.

Gallot also wondered about Tucker's selection of the heavily GOP-aligned lawyers to work with the Democratic administration's Justice Department.

"It's almost like playing chicken with them. We dare you not to pre-clear us," Gallot said.