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Shields: Local ballot will be different

By Tom Shields | Posted: Saturday, June 11, 2016 10:30 pm

Registered voters in the City of Richmond recently received an envelope from the Registrar's Office with the words "Notice of Redistricting Changes" printed in red. For the first time since 1992, voters in Richmond and most of eastern Henrico County will not be voting in the 3rd Congressional District.



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In early January, a three-judge panel imposed a new congressional map that transferred most of metro Richmond into the 4th Congressional District. The judges rightfully agreed that too many black voters had been packed into the 3rd District, thereby diluting the voting strength of black voters in nearby districts. The case was appealed to the Supreme Court and last week the high court declined to hear the petition. The 3rd District will now be centered in Hampton Roads and the 4th District will take in most of Richmond, eastern Henrico, Petersburg, and counties in Southside Virginia.

Although it is good news that Virginia has a second district with the possibility of electing an African-American to Congress, the unfortunate outcome is that Congressman Bobby Scott will no longer be representing the Richmond area. In 1992, Scott became the first African-American to be elected to Congress from Virginia since the Reconstruction era. Scott would go on to win re-election in the 3rd District over the next 24 years by wide margins.

I first met Scott in the mayoral chambers in Richmond's City Hall in early January 1993. He, along with his longtime assistant Joni Ivey, interviewed me for one of the first staff positions. Weeks later I was excited to get a letter with the congressional seal offering me a position as a legislative assistant. Over the next few years I had the privilege to work for him and get to know him as a mentor and friend.

Working for Scott shaped my views and provided me with a strong foundation of service and commitment to the marginalized. Every Scott staffer quickly learns that democratic representation is about showing up — no event or constituent request is too insignificant. Look at Scott's Twitter feed (@repbobbyscott) today and your first reaction, as many said to us in those early years, is that "he is everywhere."

In addition to his engagement with constituents in his district, Scott is incredibly well-respected as a thoughtful legislator on Capitol Hill. He is the epitome of a workhorse, not a show horse, rarely missing a vote or a committee responsibility. In today's hyper-compressed politico world with policies created on sound bites, Scott takes the long view in building coalitions, engaging in debate and offering effective and analytical solutions to our nation's most compelling problems.

Scott has never been one to grab headlines, give red-meat speeches or pound a fist for action. When the 1994 Crime Bill had provisions that a third felony conviction would lead to a life term — or, as it was termed, "three strikes and you're out" — Scott asked why a baseball analogy was guiding our nation's debate on crime and persistent offenders. It was a prescient position, as many legislators today, including

Republicans, are revisiting and even rejecting the “tough on crime” stances and the harsh penalties that have led to mass incarcerations.

No detail of a policy is too irrelevant for Scott to examine or consider, particularly if it harms his constituents. I remember walking into a hall filled with peanut farmers in Surry to discuss the peanut subsidy that was set to expire with the reauthorization of the 1995 Farm Bill. Scott requested a detailed examination of the subsidy and then took questions from the peanut farmers for hours. He left that hall with the respect and admiration of farmers who otherwise probably would not have agreed with him on many of his stances and policies.

Most recently, his seniority has led to a leadership post as the ranking member in the House Education and the Workforce Committee. Scott’s biggest success in that role has been the reauthorization of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Many credit Scott as a key player in rescuing the languishing discussion in how to replace the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which was signed into law by President Obama on Dec. 10, 2015, will have far-reaching ramifications particularly in the areas of accountability and equity.

This Tuesday, June 14, voters in the Richmond area will participate in Democratic and Republican primaries in the new 4th District. Then, on Nov. 8, we will head to the polls for a historic general election. The outcome of these contests is uncertain, but one thing is known for sure: Voters in the Richmond area will not have the opportunity to cast a ballot for one of the best representatives our region, commonwealth and nation has witnessed. Although Bobby Scott will be not far away in Hampton Roads, he will be sorely missed in the Richmond area.