

Watsonville election^s ruling celebrated

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PAJARO — After three years of litigation and a few setbacks along the way, more than 100 supporters of the lawsuit challenging Watsonville's at-large election system gathered Thursday night to celebrate the victory handed down recently by the U.S. Court of Appeals.

Despite the threat of more litigation from Watsonville city officials, the mood at Assumption Church in Pajaro was upbeat, with balloons, food and taped mariachi music providing background for the speeches.

"Tonight is a night for celebration," said Joaquin Avila, the Fremont attorney for the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund who filed suit in 1985 to force district elections.

Three weeks ago, the U.S. Court of Appeals overruled a lower-court decision and sided for MALDEF and three Watsonville residents in deciding that the present system discriminates against Hispanics. The court said the at-large system should be replaced with a district system which would have at least two districts drawn from Hispanic neighborhoods.

The city's attorney has been granted a one-week postponement until Aug. 17 to file an appeal with the three-judge panel that heard the case, or to seek a hearing before an 11-judge panel.

Avila said the case was important because it "didn't involve a very technical, very abstruse point of law. We are talking about the integration of a community that has been long-neglected. We are talking about the struggle for political equality."

The lawsuit was the first of its kind brought in the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, and will have far-reaching consequences if upheld, Avila said.

"It was a test case. We saw it as a case that would set the standard for the future," he said. School dis-

tricts and cities throughout the nine states of the federal Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals have been put on notice that similar challenges may be brought against them, Avila said.

Although Avila vowed to press the fight further, he called on the Watsonville City Council to negotiate a settlement.

"Let's stop this fighting. Let's look at the long-term implications. Let's look at California in the year 2000, when Hispanics will no longer be the minority population," Avila said.

"We're going to need leadership for our educational, economic and political institutions," Avila said. "We need to provide leadership

now so we can address the problems of the future."

The most important message to be drawn from the victory is for the Watsonville community, Avila said. From 1971-85, the Hispanic community had been unable to get any of its nine candidates elected to office under the current system of elections. The only Hispanic candidate to win office, in 1987, was Tony Campos, a real estate broker.

"We were able to demonstrate the obvious. That the Anglo community did not support Hispanic candidates," he said.

Cruz Gomez, one of three plaintiffs in the case, gave an impassioned speech in Spanish in which she vowed to run for a seat on the City Council.

"It's important to start learning how to vote. Just because we have a Latino doesn't mean he represents you. You have to look at the issues and vote for candidates who will represent your interests," Gomez said.

She also called on the City Council to "work something out. Instead of fighting, all those resources (being spent on the appeal) could be going to the social needs of the community," she said.



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Rebecca Garcia, LULAC president, celebrates with attorney Joaquin Avila and sociologist Paula Cruz-Takash.