

Watsonville politics may be forever changed

By JAMIE MARKS
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — If the U.S. Appellate Court decision reversing Watsonville's at-large election system stands, politics in this agricultural community will be changed forever.

With fewer than 9,000 registered voters in the city of Watsonville, it would take just a few hundred votes to get elected to the City Council if a seven-district election system is implemented.

And, it's unclear if city voters would elect a mayor or the council would select one, as the Santa Cruz City Council does.

The city is still reeling from the effects of the court decision, and the council is scheduled to discuss its next move at 5 p.m. today at a closed-door meeting.

The three-judge panel ruled that the present at-large electoral sys-

City considers appealing election decision

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WATSONVILLE — With the rest of California looking on, Watsonville city officials are seriously considering appealing the decision that overturned their at-large election system because of discrimination against Hispanics.

The federal appeals court decision, which will be discussed today at a closed-door session, is far-reaching in its scope, citing references to

tem discriminated against Hispanics and denied them equal representation.

The precedent-setting lawsuit was brought by the Mexican-American Legal Defense and

historic discrimination as proof of an unfair electoral system.

"We're being labelled with all of the discrimination of the state and Southwest, including Texas," lamented City Attorney Don Haile.

Haile said the legal counsel for the League of California Cities, which three years ago refused to help Watsonville fight the lawsuit, called Wednesday and "has offered a lot of help."

Other cities which have expressed an interest in the case include Gilroy, Hollister, Petaluma,

Education Fund on behalf of three Watsonville residents. U.S. District Court Judge William Ingram had upheld the system in January 1987, but the decision was appealed by MALDEF.

MALDEF's attorney Joaquin Avila of Fremont submitted several district plans that he said would guarantee Hispanics at least two seats on the City Council.

Avila's plan would also signifi-

Salinas, Huntington Beach, Los Angeles and San Diego, according to Mayor Betty Murphy.

One of the chief questions facing the city as it considers an appeal is cost. The appellate court ordered the city to pay attorneys' fees to the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund. The cost of litigation to date is estimated in the "several hundred thousand dollar range," according to one city official.

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cantly affect current council members, because five of them live within the same general neighborhood and could face each other in a district election.

Mayor Betty Murphy, and Coun-

cil members Tony Campos, Gwen Carroll, Rex Clark and Vido Dretich would be the most affected by Avila's plan. Campos is the lone Hispanic on the council.

While giving Hispanics representation, the plan would also likely hand a district to the retirement communities of Pajaro and Bay Villages.

Taking the results of the last City Council election, some 45 percent of the voters, or 3,922 people, cast ballots for mayor, City Clerk Lorraine Washington said. In an off-year, when the mayor's seat isn't contested, turnout has been as low as 28 percent.

If those 3,922 voters were mathematically divided into seven districts, it would result in 560 voters per district. In a closely contested district race, the winner could poll as few as 281 votes.

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Rebecca Garcia, president of the League of United Latin-American Citizens, which supported the lawsuit, said: "LULAC is aware we have to continue registering voters and working on citizenship. We registered over 400 new voters for last year's mayoral race.

"Part of the problem has been that many people felt disenfranchised. In Mexico, where many of the people come from, they have no experience of voting in a democracy. Nobody has educated them,

and that will be the job of a new council," Garcia said.

She added the problem of voter apathy "is not unique to our population."

Councilman Deretich said he thinks district elections would "polarize the community." He also said it could result in the city's only Hispanic councilman losing his seat.

"Say, for example, that Tony (Campos) runs in an Anglo district. Ninety-nine chances out of 100, he won't win," said Deretich, adding that he fears Anglo voters will be

less inclined to elect a Hispanic, knowing that at least two council seats are available.

That possibility hasn't been lost on LULAC, which has been at odds with Campos on a number of issues.

"I don't think Tony Campos is representing the working class of this community, of which the Hispanic population is a very large part," said Garcia.

"I was really disappointed in his (Campos') comments and feel he doesn't understand the advantages of district elections," she said, referring to Campos' statements on the decision. "I think he's representing the special-interest groups that the majority of the council represents."

Campos said he believes it's "important to get elected by the whole community."

As the first Hispanic to get elected to the council, Campos, a Realtor and developer, made history. "By me being elected, I think I helped open the doors for the Hispanics in the community, not only for the City Council, but for the business community in the Hispanic Affairs Committee," he said.

"People are saying this will fractionalize the City Council," said Garcia. "I worked on the bilingual task force (for the Pajaro Valley School District) and for every 'pro' person we had a 'con.' People said it wouldn't work, but once the members starting getting educated ... on the issues, they started to arrive at solutions."

She added, "On the City Council now, there's only one point of view. We want different options, and I think we can unite under the same goal."

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The city's insurance policy has covered the costs through the appeal, but Murphy said she doesn't know if the coverage will continue if the case is appealed to the full panel of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals or the U.S. Supreme Court.

"That (insurance) may or may not make a difference on whether we appeal," she said.

The city has 14 days to ask for a re-hearing before the panel that decided the case or seek a hearing before the full panel of the Ninth Circuit. An appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court must be made in 90 days, Murphy said.

The decision states that low voter turnout among Hispanics "may be

traceable in part to historical discrimination" and indicates a "lack of minority voters' ability to participate in the political process."

Haile noted that immigration patterns weren't mentioned as a cause of low voter turnout. Hispanics represented about 9 percent of the city's population in 1950, 27 percent in 1970 and 48 percent in 1980. Many of the city's Hispanics are not eligible to vote, or haven't registered, he said.

"From my point of view, it looks like the three judges treated this like a new trial," Haile said. "There was a re-analysis of the facts, giving new interpretations of the law. There was a lot of supposition on the part of their analysis."