

Election districts approved

Watsonville council ends years of rancorous debate

By JAMIE MARKS
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WATSONVILLE — The City Council laid to rest without comment four years of bitter debate Tuesday night, and voted unanimously to adopt a seven-district plan for future municipal elections.

The vote was greeted with a whoop and a loud round of applause by some 40 Latinos crowded into the City Council Chamber.

"It's a historic moment in California and in Watsonville," said Cruz Gomez. Gomez was one of three Latino activists who sued the city in May 1985, claiming the at-large system of electing a mayor and council members discriminated against the large, working-class Mexican-American community here.

Watsonville won the suit at the trial court level, but was reversed by the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals last summer and that decision was reaffirmed in December.

The adopted plan is similar to the one proposed by the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the group which provided legal support for the lawsuit. Only one minor modification was made during a negotiating session two weeks ago.

Mayor Betty Murphy said the city will contact the county Elections Office today to begin re-drawing the precinct lines to conform with the district boundaries. It's hoped the next election will be in November.

The city's special attorney, Vincent Fontana, and Joaquin Avila, the former MALDEF attorney who filed the suit, will submit an agreement to U.S.

District Court Judge William Ingram, detailing the seven-district plan.

"I'm very happy the city of Watsonville has taken the course of action it's taken," Avila said. He added that if both sides can agree on a written order, the judge can sign it without having to hold a public hearing.

The MALDEF plan calls for seven electoral districts, with the mayor selected from the council majority.

Two districts have Latino populations of more than 78 percent. They are located in the downtown and westside industrial sections of the city. Gomez has said she'll run for a seat from District 1, the westside neighborhood.

Five of Watsonville's current City Council reside in District 6, the Brewington Avenue area, and will have to face each other in a future election. They are Mayor Betty Murphy and council members Vido Deretich, Rex Clark, Dennis Osmer and Tony Campos. Clark

and Deretich have announced they won't seek re-election.

Council member Gwen Carroll lives in District 4, and will face attorney Todd McFarren, former chairman of the Democratic Central Committee, if McFarren decides to run.

Council member Joe Marsano lives in District 3, but has said he won't run for re-election.

District 5 includes the Jefferson Street area, where businessman and Planning Commissioner Luis DeLaCruz lives. DeLaCruz said earlier he planned to run.

District 7 takes in the retirement communities of Bay and Pajaro Villages, and is where educator and League of United Latin American Citizens President Rebecca Garcia lives. Garcia, who has actively supported the seven-district system, said she is looking for a house to buy and may not run for election if she cannot afford to live in Watsonville.

"At this point, the district is not as important to me as being able to achieve the American dream," Garcia said.