

WATSONVILLE - Govt + Politics

✓ Watsonville poised to vote — at last

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WATSONVILLE — On Dec. 5, voters in this quake-rattled city will go to the polls to elect seven members to the City Council.

The election has been postponed twice this year by historic events. The first delay came when the U.S. Supreme Court decided in March to let stand an appellate court decision overturning the at-large system of voting, on the grounds it discriminated against Latinos. The election, first set for May 9, was put off to prepare for the new system.

The stage was set for a November election under a district plan of voting. Then the earthquake struck and destroyed 195

homes, 106 mobile homes and three apartment buildings. It damaged another 1,158 homes, 340 mobile homes and 62 apartment buildings. Most of downtown also was severely damaged.

Amid the chaos, the City Council reluctantly voted to delay the city's political destiny one more month.

The issues facing the candidates have intensified since the earthquake. The housing crisis is even more critical, with some 300 to 400 people still living in shelters and tents more than a month after the temblor. Downtown redevelop-

ment has grown from only the 200 block of Main Street to include the 300, 400 and parts of the 500 blocks of Main Street.

People are still spooked. The economy is in disarray. And a new City Council is about to take over.

Sixteen candidates are running for office in seven electoral districts. Out of those, only two incumbents have a chance of returning to office. They are either Betty Murphy or Tony Campos in District 6 (Brewington-Martinelli) and Gwen Carroll in District 4 (Freedom-Pennsylvania).

The mayor will be selected from among the winners at the first meeting after the election.

In addition to electing new council members, city voters will decide a number of

other issues, such as whether a new mobile-home rent control law should be adopted, and whether the City Council should continue a 4-percent utility tax. The latter is an advisory vote only.

Voters also will decide on a number of amendments to the City Charter, including whether City Council members should be limited to two terms, and whether elections should be held in November, in odd years.

The new election system resulted from a landmark decision in July, 1988 by the Ninth Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals, which ruled that the at-large system of electing council members diluted the voting strength of the city's Latino population. Latinos make up about 60 percent

of the population, yet only Campos has broken the racial barrier to win office.

The lawsuit was brought in 1985 by Cruz Gomez, a community activist, and two other Latino residents, with the aid of the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Although the suit lost in the lower court, the plaintiffs persisted and won a reversal on appeal.

"It's a bloodless revolution," former City Attorney Don Haile said, when the U.S. Supreme Court decided not to review the case.

Latinos had another opinion. "Today is the day we begin to start over," said Gomez. "It is our day to celebrate."