

Council yields — city to have 7 districts

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Watsonville's new district-election system will have seven districts with the mayor selected by the council, the City Council decided last night.

The council's action, which was unexpected, streamlines the process for setting up the districts and makes a November election a strong possibility.

Before last night's vote, it appeared there would be a series of public hearings on whether the city should have seven districts with a mayor selected by the council, or six districts with a mayor elected at-large by the voters. Those hearings would have made an election unlikely before 1990.

The vote drew cheers from about 15 supporters of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the group that successfully sued the city to force implementation of the district system. MALDEF contended the voting power of Hispanics was being diluted by the Anglo voting bloc under the at-large system of electing council members.

Ever since the court decision became final on March 20, MALDEF backers had been pushing the city to have an election as soon as possible, and had accused the city of dragging its feet. The regular at-large election scheduled for May 9 was cancelled because of the court's ruling on the suit.

By voting for the seven-district plan now, the council wiped out the need for the hearings. There will now be negotiations between MALDEF and the city over how the district lines will be drawn. The negotiators will work from

two proposed maps, one drawn by MALDEF, and one prepared by a consultant for the city. The city's map was completed late last week.

MALDEF people were surprised and pleased with the council's action. "We feel they (council members) hadn't been listening to us in the past," said Rebecca Garcia, president of the Watsonville chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens. MALDEF supporters said that under the at-large system, the mayor would always be elected by the Anglo voting bloc.

Watsonville has a long tradition of electing mayors separately. Current Mayor Betty Murphy, an outspoken advocate of the elected-mayor plan, argued hard for having the hearings before the council decided on a plan. She got the support of only one other council member, Gwen Carroll.

Murphy, who stated publicly several times in the last few months that there would be a series of hearings, said it was "ludicrous" the city is making a decision without getting public reaction first.

Carroll said, "We're going all over town saying we're going to have hearings. I want it to be fair," she said.

Yesterday, the council was presented with four proposed district maps prepared by the consultant — one with seven districts and three with six.

City Attorney Don Haile recommended that hearings be held, and drew a brief "boo" from MALDEF supporters when he disagreed with Joaquin Avila, MALDEF's attorney. Avila said the court decision would not allow the six-district, elected-mayor plan.

"The city is not all wrong. You don't have to be stampeded," Haile said.

Avila quoted from a section of the decision which said, "the at-large scheme of mayor and council elections impermissibly dilutes the voting strength of Hispanics," and passed a copy to the council just before the vote. Rex Clark, who came out last week in favor of seven districts, said the wording in the court decision affected his stand. Tony Campos held up the vote for a minute while he read the decision.

Councilman Dennis Osmer made the motion to have the seven-district system, with the district lines decided by negotiations between the city and MALDEF.

Avila's advice is sound, said Osmer, adding that the city and MALDEF would be back in court if the city endorsed a six-district plan.

Osmer said that if the council favored seven districts, it wouldn't make sense to have hearings "just for the sake of public input." The city plans to hold informational meetings on the district plan, but now those will come after the plan is decided.

On Monday, MALDEF and the city were in federal court in San Jose for a progress hearing on the move toward setting up the districts. Avila told Judge William Ingram that MALDEF wants an election as soon as possible.

But Dana Sankary, an attorney for the city, said the public hearings would last into July, which wouldn't leave enough time for a November election. After the hearing, MALDEF people expressed frustration that Ingram wasn't sympathetic to their desire for a speedy election. Ingram said that if the two sides couldn't come to an agreement, it would be September or October before a trial could be held.

Even with the decision made on the number of districts, there is still work to be done, and not a lot of leeway before the November election.

The county Elections Department will need three to six weeks to redraw the precinct lines to conform with the new districts, and that will have to be done before candidate-filing begins in early August. This allows about a month before the city and MALDEF must agree on a plan.

There are two seven-district maps: One drawn by MALDEF three years ago, and the one just completed for the city. Both maps have what is required by the court ruling — two districts where more than two thirds of the population is Hispanic.

Murphy said she will appoint a committee to negotiate with MALDEF leaders over the district lines. Osmer said this morning he will ask to be on the committee, and that the meetings be public. "I want to start next Tuesday," he said.

REFERENCE