

How lawsuit could affect city politics

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Three City Council members could find themselves competing for one council seat if a lawsuit, filed against Watsonville yesterday in U.S. District Court, leads to the division of the city into electoral districts.

Vido Deretich, Betty Murphy and Rex Clark all live within the boundaries of one of the seven proposed districts, according to a preliminary map drawn up by the organization that filed the suit in San Jose, the Mexican American Legal and Educational Fund (MALDEF). The suit challenges Watsonville's at-large system of electing people to the City Council and asks the court to order new elections held immediately.

"I don't know how it would fall," Councilman Vido Deretich, who lives on California Street, said. "Three of us live practically next door to each other."

Rex Clark, who lives on Brewwington Avenue, declined to speculate on the outcome of the lawsuit.

"Even if they did win, it would depend on who drew the lines," he said. "If the City Council did ... Well, human nature being what it is..."

The City Council held a closed-door meeting last night to discuss the suit, but council members reached this morning declined to discuss the issue.

Both Deretich and Clark, however, citing the council's Hispanic appointees to commissions, disputed MALDEF's contention that the Hispanics in the community have been under-represented.

"We've had a number of people serving on commissions," Clark said. "Frankly, I think the problem is that not enough Hispanics in the community are registered to vote."

MALDEF lawyer José Garza

argues that Hispanics' historical distrust of the electoral system keeps them from going out to vote. A district system, Garza said, would give Hispanics more confidence in the political process.

Until 1959, when the at-large election system was voted in, Watsonville was divided into nine wards, each of which contributed an alderman to the Board of Aldermen. City Manager John Radin, remembering the ward system, compared the politics of such a system to "the pork barrel politics practiced by Congress."

"If you repaired a street in Ward 1, you had to repair one in Ward 2 and on down," Radin said this morning.

Garza, however, argues that the district system would maintain intact the strong role of the city manager, which he said would keep "pork barrel" she-nigans out of the council chambers.

"What we're after is changing the way people are elected," Garza said, "not the system."

Under a district — or ward — system, candidates for City Council would run for a seat from a particular district. The candidates would have to reside within the district, and only voters within the district would be allowed to vote for a representative of the district.

Under the current, at-large system, council members are elected by the voters at large, without any reference to district or ward lines. The candidates receiving the most votes are elected, regardless of where in the city they reside.