

Council OKs district map; November election possible

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An effort to set up Watsonville's district-election system in time for the November election cleared a major hurdle last night when the City Council approved the configuration of the seven districts.

The council's action was anticlimactic to the four-year legal battle with the Mexican American

Legal Defense and Education Fund, the group that successfully sued the city to force a switch to district elections from the at-large system, which MALDEF contended was discriminatory to Hispanics.

Without discussion, the council unanimously approved the map proposed by MALDEF and endorsed by a three-man committee of the council two weeks ago.

MALDEF attorney Joaquin Avila said he's optimistic all the work needed to set up a November election can be accomplished.

The map must be approved by William Ingram, the federal judge overseeing the case. Because there is no disagreement between MALDEF and the city, Ingram may be able to approve the map without a hearing, Avila

said.

The other major step toward a November election is having the county's voter precincts changed to reflect the district alignment. County Clerk Richard Bedal said that will take three to six weeks.

That leaves some leeway, but not much, because candidate-filing for a November election must begin in mid-August. The city is asking the county to start

changing its records right away, even before the judge makes everything official.

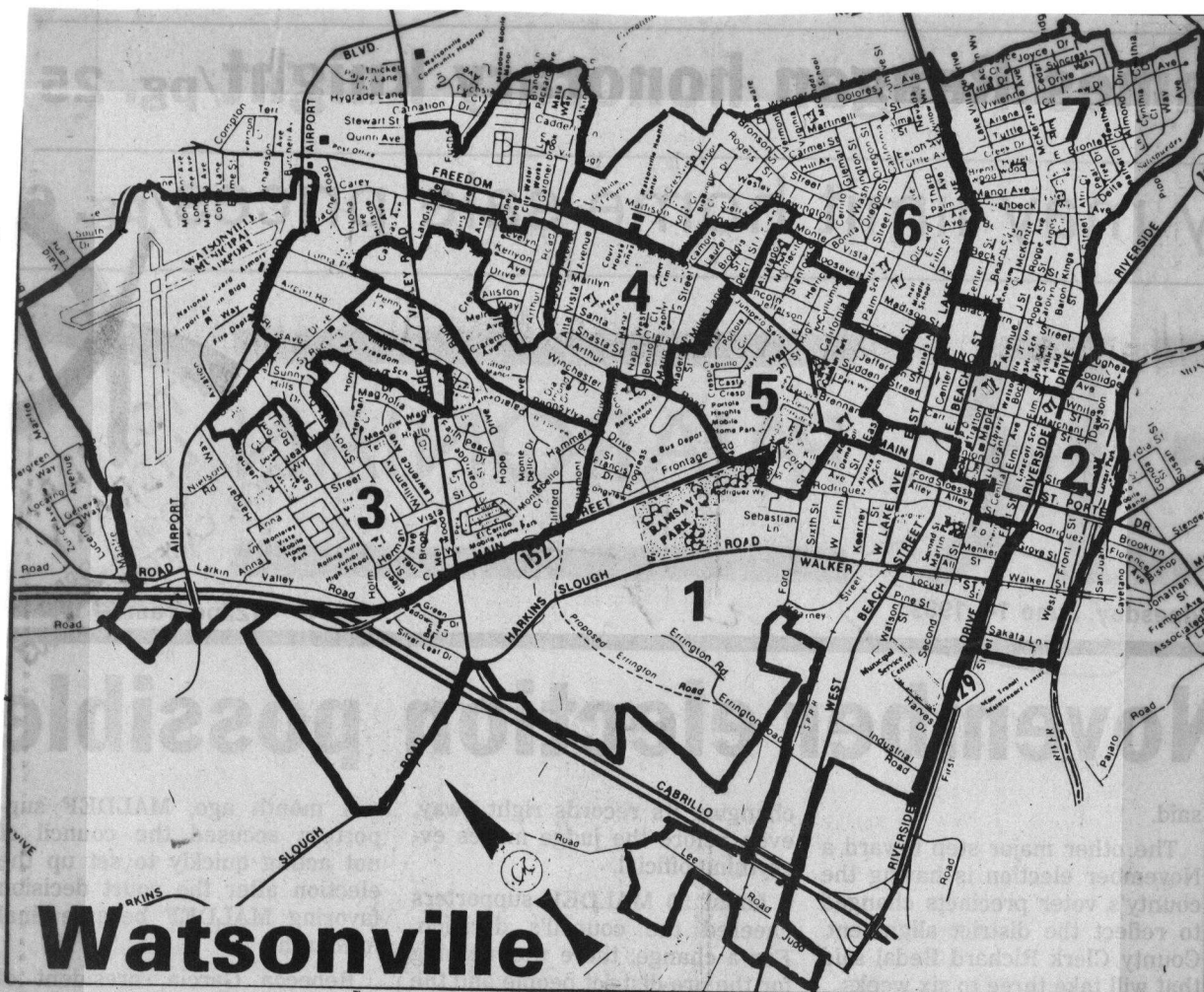
About 30 MALDEF supporters cheered the council's decision. For a change, there was nothing for the pro-district people and the council to argue about.

"We were hopeful" the map would be approved, said Cruz Gomez, a plaintiff in the case. "We were here just in case."

A month ago, MALDEF supporters accused the council of not acting quickly to set up the election after the court decision favoring MALDEF became final in March.

Rebecca Garcia, president of the Watsonville chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens, said she is "fearful they (council members) still don't see

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This is the district map approved last night by the city council. District 1 is 78 percent Hispanic; district 2, 80 percent; district 3, 37 percent; district 4, 44 percent; district 5, 44 percent; district 6, 27 percent; and district 7, 31 percent.

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the reality of the inequity with lack of representation."

Garcia said she hopes the outgoing council "will make a commitment" to help educate the people of Watsonville about the district system.

The MALDEF suit, filed in 1985, ended in March when the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the city's appeal on an appellate court decision in MALDEF's favor.

MALDEF said that under the at-large system, the voting power of Hispanics was diluted by the

Anglo voting bloc. It wasn't until 1987 that a Hispanic (Tony Campos) was elected to the council.

MALDEF, a Texas-based non-profit organization, has won about 60 similar suits in Texas. Salinas voters approved a district system last fall after MALDEF sued the city, and MALDEF is currently in trial with the city of Stockton.

In Watsonville, there will be seven districts, each with about the same number of residents. By terms of the suit, two of the districts will be predominately Hispanic. The west side district is 79 percent Hispanic and the downtown district is 80 percent Hispanic. The other districts

range from 27 to 44 percent Hispanic.

All seven council seats will be contested in the first election. That means at least five new council members will be seated. Five current council members live in District 6, the Martinelli area. Two of the five, Rex Clark and Vido Deretich, said they aren't running. Dennis Osmer said he is running, and Mayor Betty Murphy and Campos said they haven't decided.

Councilwoman Gwen Carroll, who lives in District 4, in the northeast section, said she will run. Joe Marsano, who lives in District 3 on the north side of town, said he won't seek re-election.