

Watsonville - Cont.

District election suit could still be alive ^{bn}

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WATSONVILLE — Challengers to Watsonville's election system have until Oct. 25 to reply to the city's request for a new hearing before the U.S. Court of Appeals.

On July 27, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Watsonville's at-large election system discriminates against Hispanics. In doing so, the appellate court overruled a lower court's decision from January 1987 in favor of the city.

The city immediately filed an appeal, asking the appellate court to consider either having the three judges who decided the appeal rehear arguments, or presenting the case to a new 11-judge panel composed of members of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals.

On Friday, the City Attorney's office said it received a short letter from the appellate court, ordering the plaintiffs to respond to the city's request for a hearing by the 11-judge panel within 14 days of the order, which was dated Oct. 11.

A spokeswoman for the City Attorney's Office said she didn't know what to make of the letter. "I can't tell if it's good news or bad" for the

city, said Vicki Reinheimer.

The lawsuit was brought as a test case against Watsonville by the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund — MALDEF — on behalf of community activist Cruz Gomez and two other Latinos.

It was based on a history of voting in the City Council elections, which prior to 1987 had seen eight Hispanics run but none win election.

MALDEF attorney Joaquin Avila has since filed lawsuits in several other Central California cities, including Salinas, to impose district elections.

The Salinas City Council a week ago voted to ask residents to approve a district plan. A special election will be held Dec. 6, asking city voters to amend the city charter in three ways that would accomplish the district plan, according to Monterey County Registrar of Voters Ross Underwood.

Under the Salinas proposal, hammered out in negotiations with MALDEF attorneys, the City Council would move from having four council members and a mayor — all elected at large — to six council members elected by districts and a mayor elected by an at-large system.