

Map must meet certain standards

When Joaquin Avila began work on the new district map for the city of Watsonville, his two top concerns — which were spelled out in his contract with the city — were to make it comply with the one-man, one-vote principle and the Voting Rights Act.

The first concern was fairly straightforward. Each of the seven districts has to be as close as possible in population, so each council member will represent approximately the same number of people. To

achieve parity, Avila used the latest census information, which gives population figures block by block.

The second was more difficult. The city changed to district elections in 1989 when a court found the at-large system diluted Latino voting power and violated the Voting Rights Act. Under court order, the city was to set up two districts that contained "over a 50 percent Spanish origin eligible voter population."

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While the census also provides a block-by-block count of people who have identified themselves as Hispanic, it doesn't distinguish between those who are citizens — and thus eligible to vote — and those who aren't. Figuring that out takes guesswork.

Avila analyzed voter registration for the city's two most heavily Latino districts, districts 1 and 2. In District 1, there was a Latino population of 75 percent, but Latinos made up only 36 percent of the registered voters there. In District 2, Latinos made up 89 percent of the population, but only 61 percent of the registered voters.

Usually, Avila said, a population of between 65 percent and 75 percent is enough to ensure a majority of voters, but because of the high number of undocumented residents, he figured the population in the districts would have to be higher — around 80 percent. In his proposed map, District 1 has a population that is 86 percent Latino, and District 2 has a population that is 87 percent Latino.

Avila said he also gave consideration to where the current council members live when he drew the map, but that was secondary to his first two charges. He said he didn't know that any of them would end up in the same district.

Avila said he worked from a city map showing where each of the council members lived, but that Milladin's dot was drawn on the wrong block. He also said he didn't know where Councilwoman Betty Bobeda lived until after the map was drawn — the council was in the process of selecting a replacement for the late Johnny Kacsmaryk when Avila began work on the map.

When asked what the rationale would be for keeping a council member in his or her district, Avila said only "that's a

decision for the City Council to make." He said he thought he remembered being asked to consider this when drawing up the map. It was not in his contract, nor is it spelled out in the portion of the City Charter that covers redistricting.

Avila said he wasn't sure whether the lines could be shifted a block to put Councilwoman Betty Murphy back in District 6 and Councilman Paul Milladin back in District 1 and still comply with the legal considerations, because he hadn't tried it yet.

There is apparently no legal reason the council couldn't make those changes as long as the Voting Rights Act and one-person, one-vote principle isn't tampered with. City Attorney Luis Hernandez said doing so was the council's prerogative.

When he made his presentation to the council, Avila stressed that his plan split up the fewest number of existing voting precincts possible. County Clerk Richard Bedal said he'd asked Avila to do that to make it easier on the county, which coordinates voting in the city, to match the new districts with its precincts.

Because that was done as a matter of courtesy for the county, it shouldn't stand in the way of moving district lines if the council decides it wants to keep incumbents in their districts.

Although it wasn't in Avila's contract, other considerations the council may make in redrawing the map, according to the City Charter, are natural boundaries, street lines and city boundaries, geography, cohesiveness, contiguity, integrity and compactness of territory, and community of interests within each district.

While Murphy says the new map breaks up neighborhoods, council members Parr Eves and Todd McFarren say it preserves neighborhoods, in their districts anyway, better than the current map.

—Chela Zabin