

Watsonville elections system invalid

Hispanic voter rights violated, court rules

By JAMIE MARKS
Sentinel staff writer

SAN FRANCISCO — Stung by a U.S. Court of Appeals decision Thursday overturning their citywide system of elections, Watsonville officials said the legal battle is far from over.

In a historic decision that could have ramifications throughout the nine western states of the federal Ninth District Court of Appeals, a three-judge panel ruled that Watsonville's at-large election system violates the rights of Hispanics by denying them fair rep-

resentation on the City Council.

The decision, written by Judge Dorothy Nelson, ordered the case returned to federal court Judge William Ingram to oversee a district-election plan that is consistent with the federal Voting Rights Act. Ingram upheld the present at-large system in January 1987.

"I think it's wonderful," said Joaquin Avila, a Fremont attorney for the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund which brought the lawsuit on behalf of three Watsonville citizens. "It sends a message to Watsonville and school districts here and in nine

states, and that basic message is that they should get their city attorneys and school boards to see if they are in violation of the Voting Rights Act.

"It's a blueprint for the minority community to follow," he said.

Avila said his next move will be to talk to his clients in Watsonville and review the city's reaction. "We're going to go back to our community, our clients in Watsonville, and look at our options and what the city is going to do.

"If they decide to go up to the Supreme Court, it's going to be very expensive," he said, explaining that the appellate court ordered the city to pay MALDEF's attorneys' fees for both the trial and appeal. "If they want to discuss a settlement, it's something we have to look at."

"Finally, we have the law we want," said Watsonville attorney Jose Merino, co-counsel on the case. "From Bakersfield and Salinas, up and down the state, they can quote Gomez vs. City of Watsonville and get their cities to implement district elections."

"I'm excited," yelled Cruz Gomez, a community activist and one of three plaintiffs. "Before now,



'Now we know we can actually get representation,' says Cruz Gomez, one of the suit's plaintiffs.

Dan Coyro/Sentinel

REFERENCE

SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL
July 28, 1988