

How did district system work?

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Supporters of Watsonville's new district-election system said this morning that the results of last night's election were evidence that the district system works.

"I'm very happy, I really am," said Jose (Chema) Merino, a Watsonville attorney who worked with MALDEF on the lawsuit that resulted in district elections for the city.

"The representation is distributed throughout the city. For the first time we have a participatory

democracy," he said, "People from Brewington-Martinelli have ruled our town at least since the late 1950s."

But Ed Hall, a Watsonville councilman from 1960 to 1971, said he thought Latinos would have had more representation if the at-large election, scheduled for last May, had gone on.

Hall is opposed to the district-elections system, saying that in a small town like Watsonville, they really aren't needed. He also said he was positive that at least two Latinos — Tony Campos and Jeff Solinas — would have been

elected, and a third was likely if the May elections had been held. Luis De La Cruz, Rebecca Garcia and Cruz Gomez were also running in that election.

"They actually lost the whole thing," said Hall. "They played the games by their rules (and lost). They can't complain now."

Outgoing City Councilman Dennis Osmer, a supporter of district elections, said he didn't think that getting more Latinos on the council was really the point of the lawsuit.

"I think that is where there's a misconception," he said. "The suit was never brought to bring more Latinos to the City Council; it was brought so that they would have the opportunity to be elected, which happened as soon as we went to district elections."

Hall said he was hesitant to label the new councilmen, many of whom he hasn't met, or to comment on what the change might mean for Watsonville.

Joaquin Avila, who represented MALDEF in its suit against the city, said he was disappointed for Cruz Gomez, who lost to Paul Milladin in the District 1 election. Gomez had been a plaintiff in the MALDEF suit. He said he was also disappointed that Oscar Rios was the only Latino elected to the council.

Avila said he believes that there will eventually be more Latinos on the council, but that it might take one or two elections under the new system in Watsonville before its "full impact on the political process" is felt and those candidates win, he said.

Last night's election was a step in the direction MALDEF wants Watsonville to move, he said, saying that his hope for Watsonville was full political participation of the Latino community.

At any rate, the government "is closer to the people" now because of district elections, he said.

Avila said he was also encouraged by the turnout rates, which were higher across the board than had been predicted.

Voter turnout in District 1 was up about 25 percent from 1987 elections, and about 54 percent higher in District 2. In 1987, 27 percent of registered voters turned out in District 1; this year it was 33.8 percent. In District 2 in 1987, 29 percent turned out; this year it was 44.7 percent. The figures aren't exactly comparable because the district boundaries are slightly different from the 1987 precincts.

One of the positive aspects of the district system, according to Avila, is that it does lead to

higher participation in the election process. In Salinas, for example, the Latino voter turnout at the polls was three times higher than what it had been.

"I wouldn't be surprised if had happened here," he said.

Gomez said she thought it was sad that only one Latino was elected to the new City Council, but, she said, she considers the district-election system a success because of the number of new councilmen who are sympathetic to the needs of poor people and Latinos.

Gomez said that many people in her district who had not previously been politically minded were excited by her campaign, although many of them, being non-citizens, could not vote. In fact, she said, non-citizens in her district are more politically aware and willing to be active than many who are citizens.

Osmer said he thinks the new council will be much closer to the people it represents than past councils have been.

"We've got people who will be more in touch," Osmer said. "They are going to be more representative of the people."

Osmer said he hopes that means that decisions facing the council will be made in a more open manner with greater participation from the community.

Merino said he was happy to see that the council majority appears to be liberal. He said he thought the candidates would be more responsive to the Latino community.

Hall said he was concerned that if the council majority is indeed liberal that spending on police and fire protection doesn't disappear in favor of social programs.

But the city is so financially strapped, he said, he doesn't think much will change, no matter who's in power.

But Osmer warned against labeling the new candidates.

"We've got to give them a break," he said. "My hope (for the council) is that there will be a greater effort to achieve a consensus."