

New district no guarantee of Latino power

By GREG BEEBE
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SANTA CRUZ — Although the city of Watsonville stands to become part of a historic, "Latino-influenced" Assembly district, political observers warned Tuesday not to be "misled by the power of percentages."

According to redistricting maps released this week, Watsonville would join portions of Monterey, Salinas and Santa Clara counties to become part of a new 27th Assembly District.

The population of the fledgling district would be 46 percent Latino — and 56 percent minority overall — but some Latino political experts said the new district doesn't necessarily mean a Latino assemblyman will get elected, at least right away.

"It doesn't guarantee there's going to be a Latino in that Assembly seat," said Armando Navarro, executive director of Institute for Social Justice and head of the Latino Studies Program for the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College.

"There's a high number of farm workers, a high number of immigrants," who are not eligible to vote because of illegal alien status, said Navarro.

Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rio was optimistic, but agreed that much work needs to be done to make the Latino district thrive.

"This is just the beginning," he said. "What were going to see as the next century comes is the com-

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position of California is totally changing."

Latino voting power, Rios said, "is going to have to be reflected in the districts. ...

"Theoretically, this is a practical goal that all of us are shooting for," said Rios. "We have a lot of work to do. We have to strengthen, go out and do a lot of basic work — which is registering voters."

Rios declined to speculate on possible candidates for the new seat.

The 1990 census said more than 60 percent — nearly 19,000 — of Watsonville's population was "of Hispanic origin."

Three judges — "Special Masters" called in to redistrict the

state's congressional, Assembly and Senate districts when Gov. Pete Wilson and members of the Legislature could not reach agreement last summer on redrawn lines — have created at least 15 legislative or congressional districts with either a majority, or very large minority, of Latino residents.

A 1991 interpretation of the U.S. Voting Rights Act set the stage for the increased number of what the judges' panel called "Latino-influenced" districts.

But Navarro said the new districts are an "insult" to Latinos, and "not commensurate with our population growth. ...

"This is not even the throwing of a bone. At least a bone would have

something to chew on. ... I would have expected that from the state Legislature, but I thought the courts would be far more equitable," he said.

The state's population, according to the 1990 census, is more than one-quarter Hispanic. There are 80 Assembly, 40 state Senate seats, and 45 congressional seats in California.

"Even though you have the courts now cloaking themselves in the garments of impartiality, they speak with the tongue of conservatives," Navarro said. "How can they say, with their black robes, that they have done a fair, impartial process? It shows a lack of respect, a lack of sensitivity and a lack of compassion."

Robert Brischetto, executive director of the Southwest Voter Research Institute in San Antonio, Texas, said a "Latino-influenced" district "doesn't at all answer the question of winnability."

"In California, more than half of all Hispanics are not citizens and therefore are not eligible to register to vote," said Brischetto, who tracks Latino political power.

Only when a district's population is 70 percent or more Latino does it usually ensure a "winnable seat," said Brischetto and Navarro.

"Any strategy toward Latinos mounting a political offensive needs to be pragmatic and talk about coalition-building, regardless of what the percentages are," Navarro said.