

Local

WATSONVILLE - Govt. + Politics

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Historic Watsonville election today

Voters will choose seven council members to lead post-quake city

By JAMIE MARKS
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WATSONVILLE — Voters will be going to the polls here today to pick seven council members to lead them through the next two years of earthquake recovery.

All but one — and possibly two — of the present City Council will be replaced in the election. The new council will inherit the monumental task of deciding how to rebuild the city in the aftermath of the

devastating earthquake Oct. 17, which destroyed half of downtown and 1,000 homes.

The historic election will be the first held under a courtmandated district system of voting designed to enhance the chance of Latinos winning office.

Nationally, the election is being viewed as a key test of Latino power. Locally, it's also a test of the strength of progressive Latino and Anglo candidates, who've been battling for years to gain a foothold in conservative Watsonville politics.

In July 1988, the U.S. Court of Appeals found that the at-large system of voting discriminated against Latinos by diluting their voting strength. The Anglo voting bloc effectively kept the old guard in office, despite nine attempts by Latinos to gain office.

To remedy the situation, the city was carved into seven electoral districts, two of which contain nearly 80 percent Latino populations, according to the 1980 Census. Voters in each district will elect their own representative to the new council, with the mayor being selected from among the winners.

The election has brought a score of new faces to the political scene, including five Latinos in four districts.

Voters will be going to 12 polling places throughout the city, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., to cast their ballots. Because of earthquake damage, three polling places had to be changed. The new polling places are: District 2, the city Library, Maple and Union streets; District 4, Household Bank, 1626 Freedom Blvd.; and District 6, San Francisco Federal Savings and Loan, 760 East Lake Avenue.

An additional polling place has been set up at the County Fairgrounds' clubhouse, where voters uprooted from their homes can cast their late absentee ballots. The voting booths will be open from 7 a.m. to

7 p.m., just as in the city limits.

Although City Clerk Lorraine Washington is predicting only 30 percent voter turnout, campaign workers said Monday they think the turnout will be closer to 50 percent.

Rebecca Garcia, president of the League of United Latin American Citizens, said she was "really excited about district elections.

"But I'm not sure people understand the significance of the event because 'survival' is so much on people's minds. ... The election is still not a priority to a lot of people."

Despite the uncertainty about the results, Garcia said she has been calling voters to see if they are going to vote, and she has found many first-time voters enthusiastic about the election.

"I think it will be higher than 30 percent turnout," Garcia said.

The challenge, she said, is for the candidates to encourage people to vote.

"We fought so hard for single-member districts ... now we have to get out the vote," she said.

Outgoing City Councilman Dennis Osmer said he thought district elections had already accomplished their goal.

"The fact that the city has been districted is proof the system has worked. The lawsuit was designed to give Hispanics the same opportunity to be elected as Anglos. That opportunity is there," Osmer said.

But, Osmer added, he fears an "anti-Hispanic backlash" from voters.

"There is a very strong sentiment that there is a preponderance of Hispanics taking advantage of the earthquake. It's something I don't agree with, but it's there," Osmer said.

'If they're so damned smart, let them have at it.'

*— Councilman Vido Deretich
of council hopefuls*

Even with a brand-new City Council, Osmer said he didn't expect change to come to the city overnight. "There may be a change, but it will take some time. No matter what the council makeup is, I don't think there will be a radical change," he said.

Osmer had stinging words for the outgoing City Council.

"We've left the city broke and demolished. The new council will have to go a long way to have a worse record than that," Osmer said.

Outgoing Councilman Vido Deretich said he didn't think the new council has much choice in its priorities.

"Rebuild downtown and build housing. That's what they have to do," Deretich said.

A 10-year veteran of the council, Deretich said he has grown tired of all the carping about the council's decisions.

"I heard a lot of bitching about how we killed downtown with all the (commercial) development at Green Valley and Main, but it saved us in the earthquake," he said.

Now that a new council is coming on board, Deretich said, "If they're so damned smart, let them have at it."