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Election-suit protest

Watsonville council hears from voters

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The hue and cry is getting louder in Watsonville for district elections, but the City Council majority seems steadfast in its resolve to continue fighting the lawsuit that called its election system discriminatory to Hispanics.

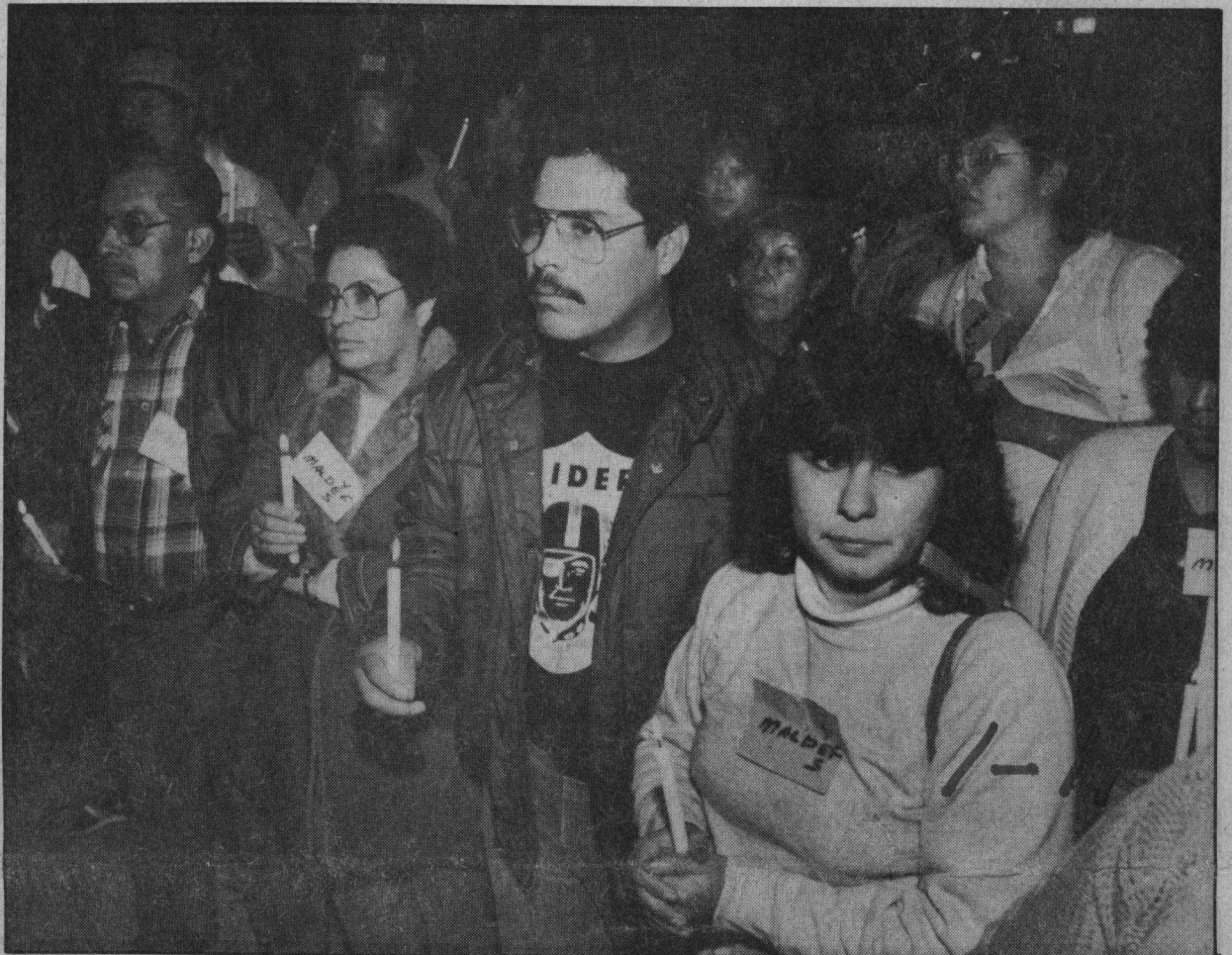
More than 100 people showed up at last night's City Council meeting for a three-hour public session on the issue of districting. Many of them lit candles in front of City Hall before the meeting and listened to brief talks in Spanish.

Speakers included Celia Organista, of the League of United Latin American Citizens; Waldo Rodriguez, a plaintiff in the election suit; Francisco Juarez, of the United Farm Workers Union; and Councilman Dennis Osmer, the only council member to come out in favor of ending the city's court fight over the suit, brought by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund.

The string of speakers who later implored the city to drop its fight and work out a districting plan included about a dozen people asked to speak by supporters of the suit against the city. Other speakers said they felt compelled to voice their opinions, but all were unanimous in urging the council not to petition the U.S. Supreme Court to hear the case.

It is not only Spanish-speaking people that want a change in our city government, but other people as well," said Erick Smith, an elderly Brent Street resident whose words were greeted with cheers, applause and foot-stomping from the crowd.

Referring to the city's 200-acre redevelopment area as



Demonstrators lit candles outside City Hall before the meeting.

Chip Scheuer

the "South Main Street wilderness," Smith said the council no longer represents the "rank and file" of Watsonville residents and asked, "Why try to save a sinking ship?"

City Attorney Don Haile, in a statement prior to the public comments, said the city had no choice because its insurance company wants to pursue the fight. A "cooperation clause" in the insurance contract could throw the city open to liability if it did not go along with the insurance company, Haile said.

The company has already spent more than \$500,000 in fighting the suit. Completing the appeal process is estimated to cost \$50,000 to \$75,000 more, he said, while MALDEF's court costs could total \$500,000 more.

Because dropping the suit against the insurance com-

pany's wishes could be considered a breach of contract, the city could be liable for \$1 million in court costs, Haile said.

Continuing its fight would cost the city no more than the \$2,500 deductible payment it already owes the insurance company, he said.

Haile also said that despite Salinas's negotiations with MALDEF and the subsequent citywide vote to go to districting, MALDEF is seeking to collect attorneys' fees from Salinas. He suggested that if MALDEF was serious about wanting to negotiate with Watsonville, it would waive its attorneys' fees.

"If not," Haile said, "then what is the true objective of MALDEF: to help Hispanics or to make money by suing cities

in the state of California?"

Haile's question was booed by the audience and prompted Osmer to respond that the people of Watsonville should be outraged at "this idea of government by insurance company."

He called for some substantiation of Haile's statement on the city's liability if it dropped the suit.

"I really refuse to believe that we are going to be hung with a million dollars if we refuse to go on," Osmer said.

He also moved later that the council get more information on its insurance, and make its final decision on further appeal on the case in an open session at its Jan. 24 meeting.

MALDEF

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Mayor Betty Murphy objected, however, that taking any action, such as Osmer's motion, would constitute a violation of California's open-meeting law, since the election discussion was not an action item.

Osmer then asked that the item be placed on a future agenda for action, but stressed that the issue would be moot if the council met in any closed sessions on the election suit.

"What I'm asking for is a public discussion from here on out," he said.

However, Councilman Joe Marsano asked for a closed meeting on the insurance issue with Vince Fontana, the New York attorney representing the city in its court fight.

The plea for open sessions on the lawsuit was repeated several times throughout the evening, both by Osmer and

members of the public. Hispanic speakers also urged that they be allowed more participation in Watsonville's government.

Maria Corralejo, who said she is a native of the area and has lived in Watsonville since 1980, took umbrage at remarks Murphy has made that Hispanics are working their way to the council by first serving on city commissions.

Corralejo said she had applied twice to sit on the Planning Commission but was denied, despite her master's degree in architectural landscaping and regional planning.

"At-large elections perpetuate the divisiveness and discrimination that goes on in the Spanish community," she said.

Manuel Bersamin, who described himself as a Watsonville native and a UC-Irvine graduate, said many young people in the Hispanic community are struggling like he is to rise out of poverty.

"Farm-worker families are

the key and the foundation of the Watsonville community," he said. He said the Hispanic and white communities were treated differently, pointing to the lack of street lights in the Hispanic neighborhoods and to the adequate lighting in the predominantly white neighborhoods.

"You drive down Brewington and you drive down Roosevelt," Bersamin said, "and there is enough light to read a newspaper by."

Watsonville resident and attorney Todd McFarren said at-large election systems tend to draw a council from a small section of the community that caters to "the country-club set."

Referring to statements alleging that Watsonville's previous districting system, called the ward system, encouraged corruption, McFarren said that was a "false historical analogy." It was the city-manager form of government, not the replacement of the ward elec-

tion systems with the at-large system, that ended corruption, he said.

McFarren called for an end to the city's court fight and described Haile's remarks about liability as "probably the most vacuous, boot-strapping argument I've ever heard."

Watsonville resident Robert Chacanaca presented the council with a stack of petitions with more than 300 signatures, and said he would continue collecting signatures so the council would have a "people's mandate" to go to district elections.

Other speakers urging the council not to petition the Supreme Court included LULAC president Rebecca Garcia, Paula Cruz Takash, a doctoral candidate who recently studied the "Latinization of Watsonville," Dick Bernard of the Watsonville Democratic Club, a Salinas attorney involved in the MALDEF negotiations, cannery worker Oscar Rios and various city residents.