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Watsonville campaigns begin as fight over districting goes on

By JENNIFER KOSS
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Watsonville City Council candidates are gearing up for an at-large election May 9, but the voting-rights group that filed suit against the city is still trying to stop it.

"We're going to file papers to try to stop the election," said Joaquin Avila, attorney for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, which contends that Watsonville's at-large election system is discriminatory to Hispanics.

At the same time, MALDEF and the city may soon sit down together to see if a districting plan can be worked out.

Avila said he and MALDEF plaintiff Cruz Gomez would be reviewing statistics today to try to work out a districting plan to present to the city. Avila said he expected to send a plan to Watsonville next week, in response to Mayor Betty Murphy's letter requesting a meeting.

Murphy was directed by the council to send the letter, after Councilman Vido Deretich suggested the council sit down with MALDEF to try negotiating a districting compromise

instead of going to the Supreme Court. Avila said he was in favor of meeting, but first wanted to work out a districting proposal.

Avila also said MALDEF's response to the city's petition to the U.S. Supreme Court to review the case was filed Monday. The matter is on the court's March 17 calendar and could be reviewed at that time, he said. The Supreme Court could decide whether it will hear the case as early as March 20, Avila said, or as late as October.

Avila said this morning an application would probably be filed with the U.S. Supreme Court next week, asking the court to "vacate the stay" of the lower court's order to go to district elections. It is the lower court's order that Watsonville is appealing.

If MALDEF's request to vacate the stay is granted, it would mean Watsonville would have to adopt a districting plan. If granted before May 9, Avila said he would ask that the council election be postponed until a districting plan was in place; if granted after the May 9 election, Avila would ask that the election be held again under

the districting plan.

"All the people that have been campaigning and so on would have to start over," he said.

Watsonville City Clerk Lorraine Washington said the council election usually costs the city around \$20,000. However, she expects May 9 election costs to rise as high as \$25,000, as a result of increased printing costs for ballot measures such as the \$5 million street-improvement bond issue.

If the courts ordered the election held again, it would cost the city \$20,000 to \$22,000 more, Washington said.

Five candidates have turned in their nomination papers, she said. They are council incumbent Gwen Carroll, businessman Luis De La Cruz, teacher Rebecca Garcia, labor lawyer Todd McFarren, and family doctor Jeffrey Solinas.

No one else had taken out nomination papers as of this morning, Washington said, but they have until Tuesday to do so. The deadline for returning the papers, with the requisite 20 valid signatures of registered voters, is Tuesday at 5 p.m.