

Watsonville to join suit against Census Bureau

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

Watsonville will ask to take part in a major lawsuit against the federal Census Bureau, the City Council has decided.

The council voted 5-0 yesterday, with council members Betty Murphy and Johnny Kacsmayk absent, to join a lawsuit filed in 1989 by Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, the states of California and New York, and several other groups and individuals charging that the Census Bureau's methods result in a chronic undercount.

City Attorney Luis Hernandez said the federal government had worked out an agreement with the plaintiffs about what would happen after the census — how the "post-census enumeration" would take place.

But, Hernandez said, "that agreement seems to be unravel-

ing, and there might be some litigation."

The suit charged that the 1990 census, as planned, would be certain to undercount blacks, Hispanics and members of other disadvantaged groups.

This is at least in part because it's harder to count people who are illegal immigrants, people who are homeless, people who don't speak or read English very well, and people living in conditions of poverty or in high-crime areas, the suit says.

The Census Bureau at one point agreed to use statistical methods to correct the undercount, the suit says, but was overruled by the Commerce Department.

The undercount shortchanges local governments, cities claim, because state and federal grants are based on population.

It also distorts political power, they say, because the number of representatives an area gets in the House of Representatives and in the state Assembly is also determined by population.

Hernandez said that up until now, Los Angeles hasn't wanted other cities to join in. But recently it has changed its tune, he said, and now it looks as though a large number of cities will join in.

Hernandez said a New York law firm is handling the case pro bono, so Watsonville won't have to spend any money on it.

Ray Vigil, the chairman of the council-appointed Complete Count Committee, urged the council to join the suit because, he said, Watsonville has hard evidence to support the charges against the federal bureau.

See CENSUS page 2 ▶

highs 70s and 80s, lows mid-40s to the 50s. Inland valley highs 80s to low 90s, lows 50s to lower 60s. Mountain highs mid-60s to the low 80s, lows 30s and 40s.

CENSUS - 1990

▶ From Page 1 RP 9/20/90 p.2

"We are facing a gross undercount (in Watsonville) that will be very, very significant both in funds and in representation," Vigil said.

Even Watsonville's own voting district borders would be skewed by a census undercount, Vigil said.

The initial census figure for Watsonville was 29,764. The state Department of Finance has figured that there are 30,882 people here.

Vigil said that another reason to join the suit is that the city went on record before the census began, asking for a door-to-door count because people were displaced by the Oct. 17 earthquake, and may have been harder to

reach by mail.

Vigil said the small number of bilingual census takers was also a concern voiced here from the start.

Councilman Oscar Rios said it was hard to believe there could be such discrepancies in figures in the age of computers.

By joining the lawsuit, he said, "we are making a statement to the Census that we are not happy."

The Complete Count Committee will make a more formal presentation at the council's regular meeting Tuesday night, Vigil said.