

Victory celebration



Celia Organista, Linda Stone, attorney Joaquin Avila and Rebecca Garcia (left to right) show their

happiness at the court decision forcing Watsonville to elect its City Council by districts.

Diane Varni

City must now carve out districts

By JENNIFER KOSS
STAFF WRITER

With Watsonville's legal battle over its at-large election system ended, the big question now is how the lines will be drawn for district elections in the city.

Watsonville could face another lawsuit if it draws up a plan perceived as violating voting rights, said Joaquin Avila, attorney for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund. Avila said he won't consider the lawsuit over until a districting plan is in place.

The city's four-year legal fight over a lawsuit MALDEF filed in May 1985, which called Watsonville's at-large elections discriminatory to Hispanics, ended yesterday with the U.S. Supreme Court's refusal to hear the case.

That means the previous

court ruling in favor of MALDEF is upheld and Watsonville will be issued a mandate to go to district elections. Avila said the lower-court mandate for districting will go into effect as soon as the appeals court receives written notice in the mail of the Supreme Court's decision not to hear Watsonville's case.

MALDEF supporters are hoping the City Council will consult them when drawing up a districting plan, said Rebecca Garcia, president of the local League of United Latin American Citizens.

"I hope they make every effort to unite and work with us together and come up with a plan that would be a community plan," Garcia said.

The City Council was scheduled to meet today at 4 p.m. to discuss a districting plan. Mayor Betty Murphy

said she would return to the council chambers at 7 p.m. for anyone who had questions and was unable to attend the earlier meeting.

City Attorney Don Haile said this morning he would recommend the council schedule a public hearing when it's ready to propose a districting plan, rather than work with just MALDEF supporters.

"I think this concerns the whole city," Haile said, "and not just those few who have been vocal."

Haile was recommending at today's meeting that the council act to cancel the May 9 election. Haile said he thought it would be illegal to hold an at-large council election in light of the Supreme Court's action.

One of seven candidates

vying for three council seats in the May 9 election, Garcia said she would continue campaigning and was now investigating neighborhood concerns in preparation for a district election. She said she would make her final decision on whether to run for the council after a districting plan was completed.

Garcia and other MALDEF supporters met last night for a victory celebration of the Supreme Court decision.

"It was really exciting just to have the synergy of all the people there," Garcia said.

Former LULAC president Celia Organista commented last night that Hispanics in Watsonville feel they have gone through the wringer, as other immigrant groups have had to do.

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The clerk complied, and the man scooped up the bills and fled on foot.

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ELECTION

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"A whole new world is opening up," Organista said. "There's a lot of work ahead, but now this part is over."

What shape Watsonville's districting plan will take is unknown at this point, but Mayor Murphy has said she would favor one with six districts, plus a mayor elected at-large.

Avila and MALDEF supporters have suggested a system of seven districts, with a mayor selected by the council. Avila said the hope was to carve out three "minority districts" of the seven.

Avila said this morning he intended to ask the federal district court for a "remedy hearing" as soon as MALDEF has worked out its own districting plan. At that point, he said, he would contact Watsonville to see if it wanted to negotiate on a plan.

Judge William Ingram's U.S. District Court in San Jose, which ruled in favor of Watsonville in the original decision on the MALDEF suit, is charged with the responsibility of overseeing a districting plan.

If MALDEF doesn't like the final plan, Avila said he would appeal to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco, which overturned Ingram's decision and said Watsonville's at-large elections were discriminatory to Hispanics.

In upholding that ruling by refusing to hear the case, the Supreme Court gave MALDEF ammunition for other lawsuits. Largely because of the decision in the Watsonville case, MALDEF plans to file "five to 10" more lawsuits in other locales, Avila said.

He said the decision "provides us with the incentive to go forward and eliminate discriminatory at-large elections, and provide for a politically integrated community."