

Madera OKs vote on voting process

Council OKs ballot measure to switch from at-large ballot.

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By Chris Collins / The Fresno Bee

The Madera City Council is one step closer to having its members elected by district after endorsing a new map that, if approved by voters, would carve the city into six parts.

Currently, the city's five council members are elected at-large and are allowed to live anywhere in the city. All five live on the west side of Highway 99 -- which splits the city in two -- and four of them live within a mile of one another.

The proposed ballot measure would increase the number of council members to seven and create six districts within the city. Each council member would have to live in his or her district and be elected by residents in that district. The mayor, who is a member of the council, would be elected at-large.

In recent years, government agencies in the Central Valley, including Madera Unified School District, have been sued for failing to comply with the California Voting Rights Act. The 2002 law says that representatives for many agencies that serve large minority voting populations should be elected by district rather than at-large. It is meant to give Hispanics and other minorities proportionate political influence.

Currently, all five Madera council members are white; the city is 76% Hispanic.

Council Member Sally Bomprezzi said Thursday that Madera officials are worried that if they do not move toward by-district elections, the city will be sued.

"That was the reason we became real proactive with it," she said. "We didn't want to be in the same position that Madera Unified found itself in."

City Manager David Tooley, however, insisted that the lawsuits had nothing to do with the decision. He noted that the council has discussed changing the way its members are elected since 2001.

The City Council on Wednesday voted 4-0, with one member absent, to approve a map that splits the city into six parts with an equal number of residents in each district. With one exception, the districts are largely on one side of Highway 99 or the other. The map does, however, ensure that Hispanic voters make up more than 55% of the population in four of the districts.

Voters will decide in November whether to approve the map and switch to district elections. Bomprezzi said she hopes they do.

"I've always been in favor of districts because I don't feel the council is a fair representation of the city," Bomprezzi said.

But City Council Member Robert Poythress doesn't think the city needs districts. He was the only council member to vote "no" in December 2008 when the council decided to pursue by-district elections.

"Personally, I believe that all parts of the community have been served and their concerns have been heard," Poythress said. "As long as you know how to represent people, it doesn't matter what your ethnicity or background is. To me, it's racist to assume that you have to be of a certain ethnicity to represent a group of people properly."

Nevertheless, he said, he supports the city's decision to put the measure on the ballot, because it will give residents a chance to decide for themselves how they want to elect council members.

Even if the measure is approved, the districts would most likely be redrawn before they ever get used. That's because the first by-district election wouldn't be until 2012 -- after the 2010 census.

Tooley said that the city will be required to adjust its districts based on the new Census data. But, he said, the city will use the map approved by the City Council as a template for the re-drawn map.