

Editorial: District voting will prevail

March 4, 2010

Visalia Unified School District is moving with all deliberate speed toward changing its system for electing trustees from at-large to district elections.

The district only started talking about this change last year, but it hopes to have the conversion completed by its trustee elections next year.

In an article about the process this week, Randy Groom, director of administrative services for the district, described the move to district elections as "a done deal."

Groom was promptly accused by online commentators as overstating the situation.

In fact, Groom isn't overstating the situation at all. District elections are not only a done deal for VUSD but for virtually every elective governmental jurisdiction in the state of California. It's only a matter of time, and, in some cases, money.

We have long advocated district elections for all jurisdictions in Tulare County, for a great number of reasons, not the least of which is that it's the law, both according to the federal Voting Rights Act of 1964 and its various successors, and the California Voting Rights Act of 2001, which is based on the federal law.

District elections are also a good idea for several other reasons. District elections:

- Encourage more people to become involved in the electoral process, both as voters and as candidates.
- Reduce the amount of money needed to run a campaign.
- Ensure local representation for neighborhoods.
- Ensure broad representation geographically throughout the district. The main reason that district elections are becoming the standard in California and elsewhere is because at-large voting frequently shuts out minorities and other groups that are underrepresented

in government. That's where the Voting Rights Acts come in. There is no point in arguing with any of those facts. They have been well-established both in the courts and by voting research used to defeat at-large voting in jurisdiction after jurisdiction in California. Resisting the move to district elections has proved futile and, as we shall see, expensive.

The city of Modesto was sued under the California Voting Rights Act to force the city to adopt district elections. The city lost and was fined \$3 million. It also was responsible for court costs of \$1.7 million.

The Hanford school district was sued and settled out of court for an undisclosed amount.

In 2008, the Madera school district was ordered by a judge to set aside its at-large election results and essentially cease functioning until it had adopted district voting.

The Tulare Health Care District is fighting a lawsuit at present.

It is expected to go to trial in June and could cost the district millions. Jurisdictions in Madera and Fresno voluntarily moved to district elections to avoid lawsuits.

The VUSD is correct to move toward district elections while it can do so on its own terms and without the complication and expense of legal

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action. School officials know that the Central Valley is being targeted by the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, the group behind the Madera and Tulare actions, to convert holdouts for at-large voting.

This is an important issue for voting rights' activists in the San Joaquin Valley because of the large minority — mostly Latino — population compared with the very low minority representation.

The wonder is that city of Visalia officials aren't pursuing the same course. True, Visalia voters rejected district voting in 1993. It had been placed on the ballot then mostly because of fear of lawsuits. But courts have ruled repeatedly that jurisdictions move to district elections even after their voters rejected district voting.

To reiterate: It's only a matter of time and/or money until Visalia complies with district voting.

Two Visalia City Council members this week said they don't believe district elections are right for Visalia.

Council member Amy Shuklian said district representation would isolate council members and make governing more unwieldy.

Council member Steve Nelsen said district voting would prevent him from representing all of Visalia.

In rebuttal: Council members must learn to work together however they are elected. There would be nothing to prevent any council member from deciding on citywide initiatives once elected. In fact, members elected from districts would provide greater influence from specific neighborhoods.

Unfortunately, all but a handful of City Council members elected in the past 20 years have come from south or central Visalia. We suspect that might be one reason that north Visalia gets so little attention.

The people of Tulare County will hear much more about this in the coming months as the machinery is set in motion to change to district voting. The sooner public officials recognize the inevitability of that movement, the smoother the transition will be.

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
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