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Sunnyside is drawing the line

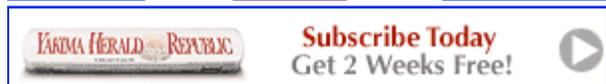
With U.S. Justice Department looking over its shoulder, city moves toward district elections

by Pat Muir

Yakima Herald-Republic

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As voters start filling out ballots for this year's state and county elections, officials in Sunnyside continue fine-tuning a new city election system designed to ensure better representation for Latinos.

Under pressure from the U.S. Justice Department, the Sunnyside City Council voted last summer to abandon its at-large election format, in which all citizens can vote for all City Council positions.

The federal agency began investigating the city after a 2006 report by a Whitman College undergraduate student found the old system violated the Voting Rights Act, creating racially polarized voting that in effect kept Latinos from being elected. About three-quarters of the Sunnyside population is Latino, but only one of seven council members is Latino.

"We knew this was one of those things that we needed to act on as soon as possible," said Councilman Jim Restucci, who served on a city committee examining the issue after the Whitman report came out.

The new election system, approved by the council last year and set to take effect for the 2009 elections, will keep three of the seven council positions at-large while the other four are split among four districts in the city.

Those districts were determined roughly by city staff and Yakima County elections officials working with county Geographic Information Systems staff. One covers essentially the part of the city north of the Yakima Valley Highway. Another covers essentially everything east of Sixth Avenue between Yakima Valley Highway and Lincoln Avenue. A third covers everything west of Sixth Avenue between Yakima Valley Highway and Lincoln Avenue. And another covers basically everything south of Lincoln Avenue.

There are slight variations, because the districts have to hold the same amount of people. And the exact boundaries have yet to be determined as county elections officials combine mapping data based on the 2000 Census with data from the city about new residential developments.

"(The districts) are like building blocks," said Mike Martian, head of the county's Geographic Information Systems department. "So if you add some to one pile, you have to try to keep all the other piles the same."

He and county elections workers Kathy Fisher and Lupe Camacho are headed to Sunnyside later this month to continue working with city staff on exactly where the boundaries should be. The plan is to get a final proposal ready for county approval by March, City Attorney Mark Kunkler said. Before that, the Sunnyside public will have at least one chance to voice their opinions on the proposed boundaries.

While all of this is going on, the idea of improving Latino representation by increasing Latino participation in elections has not been entirely lost.

That part of it, not a shift in election systems, is going to be where the real gains are made, said Restucci, who like the majority of the council voted to change systems because of pressure from the Justice Department, not because they think it will work.

"I kind of feel like we were strong-armed into it," he said. "I don't feel like districting is going to change the number of registered voters or the number of candidates."

Toward that end, he said he hopes the committee that formed to deal with the elections issue will reconvene and work more on voter participation.

"It should actually probably become a standing commission or committee within the city," Restucci said.

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