

From the YakimaHerald.com Online News.

Published on Tuesday, February 13, 2007

[Printable Version](#) [E-mail to a Friend](#)

Hispanic participation studied
By PAT MUIR
YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

SUNNYSIDE -- The City Council here voted Monday to form a committee that will examine why so few Hispanics are elected to the council and why so few people overall vote in the city's elections.

The panel, to consist of three council members and three city residents, will among other things examine the prospect of district-by-district council elections, Mayor Ed Prilucik said.

This comes on the heels of a December Whitman College report that said Sunnyside's at-large council elections keep Hispanics off the council in violation of the Voting Rights Act.

While several council members Monday said they disagreed with that report's findings, they voted unanimously to form the committee.

"I think the intent of that (the Whitman report) was to up participation in our community in our government," Prilucik said.

He said he agreed that needs to be done. However, Prilulick differed from the report's author, Whitman student Ian Warner, as to the remedies for that lack of civic engagement. He suggested the \$40-per-meeting salary for council members coupled with the time commitment of such service keeps poorer Sunnyside residents from running for council.

"What's important to a person with a family?" he said. "First of all, it needs to be family. If they can't provide for their family, they certainly won't be volunteering for government activity."

Councilman Bruce Epps agreed that poverty is an issue and suggested that, if the council did switch to districts, there may be some districts where nobody is willing to run because "they can't afford to take away from their family to be able to do that."

The district question was first raised by Warner's work, part of a larger Whitman report, "The State of the State for Washington Latinos: 2006." His research showed racially polarized voting in Sunnyside, with Hispanic council candidates getting more votes in largely Hispanic precincts. That combined with at-large elections and low Hispanic representation on the council -- one Hispanic council member in a city that is 73 percent Hispanic -- constitutes a violation of the Voting Rights Act of 1964, he said.

Warner's mentor for the project, Joaquin Avila, is a former president of the Mexican American Legal Defense Fund, which has filed legal challenges in similar circumstances in California cities and won. Avila is the attorney who filed the landmark suit leading Watsonville, Calif., to switch to districts from at-large elections.

Last month, an attorney from the U.S. Justice Department's civil rights division contacted Warner, the Whitman professor who assigned the report and two local Hispanic activists to discuss the report. According to people who spoke with the attorney, he suggested that community members needed to lead the way in gathering statistics and information if there was to be a legal challenge to Sunnyside's elections.

The prospect of such an action hung over Monday's discussion of the matter by the council.

Though he agreed with the rest of the council that Warner's conclusions were wrong, the council's lone Hispanic, Paul Garcia, said the council would be better off at least examining the issue.

"Regardless of whether we agree with it or not, there is a possibility they (someone filing a legal challenge) may determine our future," he said.

Prilucik said he hopes to select members of the ad-hoc committee looking into the matter this week. The group will be expected to come up with recommendations for the council, but Prilucik does not plan to give them a timetable.

"I'm going to leave that to them. É I don't have any interest in spoonfeeding them," he said.

Even if the group was to suggest a switch to district elections and the council approved it, there would not be time to implement the change for this year's council elections, City Manager Bob Stockwell said.

* Pat Muir can be reached at 837-6111 or pmuir@yakimaherald.com.