

Napa moves one step closer to electing council members by district

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“Your voters should select you, you shouldn’t select your voters,” said Robert Van Der Velde during public comment at Wednesday night’s special City Council meeting.

His comment crystallized what’s at stake in the city’s transition from at-large to district-based voting, by which Napa will be divided into four districts, each assigned one seat on the council. Residents from these new geographic areas will only vote for their respective seat and, conversely, candidates for the position must reside in that neighborhood.

Van Der Velde and about a dozen other individuals spoke at Wednesday’s meeting to provide input to council on how they think the district map should look, noting potential borders like Highway 29 or the Napa River, neighborhood groupings and shared interests like home ownership and age, for example. Eight others submitted online worksheets provided on the city’s website ahead of time with their thoughts.

City Council received a letter in January alleging the current at-large voting system – in which every resident votes for all open seats on the council – violated the California Voting Rights Act and threatening legal action if it weren’t rectified by the creation of districts.

According to public affairs consulting firm GrassrootsLab, district elections have been imposed in 57 California cities since last November, and 79 have changed over since 2016. The stated goal is to empower the voice of minority communities whose votes are diluted by the citywide election.

Napa’s [Latino community accounts for about 41%](#) of the city’s population, yet only one Latino has ever been elected to City Council.

City Council hired Paul Mitchell, a demographer whose firm Redistricting Partners has a laundry list of former clients who have undergone a similar transition to districts. Mitchell walked attendees through an outline of the process, explained state and federal legal requirements in drawing districts and opened himself up to questions from members.

“This is drawn by the public and it’s transparent,” he said.

The demand letter received earlier this year jumpstarts a legal process that leaves council and city staff with little wiggle room to make adjustments. It dictates a step-by-step process for public engagement: five public hearings, the first of two of which can't include maps, the second two of which provide a chance for the public to comment on draft maps and the last of which will put the finalized map up for a vote.

Wednesday's **meeting was the second meeting**, meaning no maps were shown. Similarly, none have been drawn by the demographer.

California voting law also sets strict parameters for how quickly this process must be completed. Council has 90 days to hold these meetings, settle on a district map and vote on the ordinance to establish the new system and new boundaries. Currently, the city plans to hold the vote on April 21, giving it a small buffer against the deadline in the event more time is needed.

However, residents continue to express frustration at the timeline.

"I'm a concerned citizen ... I'm concerned that this process needs to slow down," said Conchita Marusich, who also noted that she felt the Latino leadership within Napa hadn't been adequately included in this process.

Her feelings were echoed by a number of other speakers during public comment, prompting a response from Councilman Scott Sedgley.

"This is rushed. I still feel it is extremely rushed," he said.

Frustration aside, little can be done to extend the window for creating these districts. City Attorney Michael Barrett told the Register in a phone call last month that the petitioner – Walnut Creek-based attorney Scott Rafferty on behalf of the Napa County Progressive Alliance (NCPA) – has a "strong interest" in instituting districts this year, and is "not prepared to agree to an extension."

Barrett also said there's "no obligation to extend," and, as such, council is powerless in changing the timeline without likely legal action barring a change of heart from Rafferty and the NCPA.

Rafferty was present at Wednesday's session – he did not attend the Feb. 25 meeting – and said he was "willing to be flexible on timing as much as the legislature allows"; he did not imply a willingness to kick things beyond the legally mandated 90-day timeframe or hold off to next year.

Turnout was another concern raised in public comment.

“We have 80,000 people in Napa, and how many people are here? The whole purpose is to achieve a high democracy,” Renee Cazares said, pointing to the roughly one-third-full chambers room and calling on City Council to improve its awareness-building activities.

“Some people think this is about the islands,” she added, referring to the unincorporated parts of Napa County that are surrounded by city boundaries and some believe should be annexed.

Mayor Jill Techel and Councilwoman Liz Alessio acknowledged the smaller-than-hoped-for turnout but remained optimistic.

Alessio encouraged staff to increase its social media presence, suggested attendees sign up for the city’s weekly newsletter and asked residents to host conversations and get-togethers with their neighbors to spread the word.

Techel said she thinks things will change for the next meeting once draft maps are on the table.

“I do think once people get maps and those are out in the community and people are looking at them, we’ll see a fuller room,” Techel said. “We know people join the process at different times.”

Council members will not be present due to potential violations of the Brown Act – a California law that protects the public’s right to witness legislative body discussion – but they will receive a summary of all the findings at the next public hearing held Tuesday, March 17, at 6:30 p.m.

“What’s exciting for me is that next time I get to look at maps,” said demographer Mitchell.