Wiseburn school district begins lengthy separation process from Centinela Valley

By Rob Kuznia Staff Writer Daily Breeze

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After more than a decade of being stuck in what has resembled a bad marriage, the Wiseburn elementary school district serving part of Hawthorne and the wider Centinela Valley high school in which it sits are crafting the equivalent of an amicable divorce.

This week, in a remarkable move given their history of mutual hostility and legal battles, both the Centinela Valley school board and the Wiseburn school board separately passed a resolution that essentially begins the process of allowing Wiseburn to officially extricate itself from the Centinela high school district (composed of Hawthorne, Lawndale and Leuzinger high schools) and become its own unified K-12 school district.

Tuesday's move was only the first step in what is expected to be a 2 1/2 year process at a minimum, but the accord stands in striking contrast from the discord that has characterized the relationship of the two school districts.

"I have new respect for their attorneys," said Tom Johnstone, superintendent of the Wiseburn school district, speaking of Centinela's legal team. "Rather than us trying to defeat them and them trying to defeat us, our attorneys all worked together attacking a common problem."

However, while the former adversaries are finally on the same page, a new set of opponents has emerged: the other three elementary districts that feed into Centinela - Hawthorne, Lawndale and Lennox. Officials from these school districts want their residents to have a say in the matter.

At the core of the complex web is a simple enough notion espoused by the Wiseburn camp: ensuring fair taxation. Taxpayers, they say, shouldn't have to subsidize schools that their children aren't attending, especially if the community has demonstrated a willingness to create its own K-12 district.

(In a move seen as a referendum on unification, Wiseburn voters in November of 2010 overwhelmingly passed a ballot initiative to build a new public high school from the ground up.)
Under the current setup, families in the Wiseburn district - which consists of the Hawthorne neighborhood of Holly Glen and unincorporated Los Angeles County neighborhoods of Del Aire and Wiseburn - must pay into construction bonds to build new schools in Centinela Valley.

(Even though students from Dana Middle School in Wiseburn are officially supposed to matriculate into one of the three Centinela schools, only about 5 percent actually do. The majority attend either Da Vinci charter high school in the Wiseburn neighborhood or one of the beach city high schools.)

But complicating the matter is a host of legal monkey wrenches. First off, some fear that Wiseburn's departure could potentially cause taxes to go up for residents in Hawthorne, Lawndale and Lennox, as they would have to make up for Wiseburn's absence.

And then there is the issue of the extremely lucrative El Segundo business corridor. Composed of corporate giants such as Mattel, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, AIG, Xerox and others, this pot of gold is officially part of the Wiseburn school district. In theory, this means that if Wiseburn leaves, it could take its pot of gold with it, reducing Centinela's tax base by more than a third. Finally, school officials are concerned that the more affluent Wiseburn district would poach the best students from Leuzinger, Lawndale and Hawthorne high schools.

To get around these and other sticking points, the so-called "joint powers agreement" approved Tuesday night by both the Centinela Valley and Wiseburn school boards is seeking to come up with a solution that is palatable to both parties. This means sides both must give a little.

Wiseburn, for starters, would agree to continue paying its share of two school construction bonds passed in 2008 and 2010. In total, that amounts to about $87 million, or nearly half of the amount levied by the sum of those two bonds.

Wiseburn also would agree to share the business corridor with Centinela. To address the concern about poaching the best students, Wiseburn would agree to accept no more than 450 students from the Centinela Valley district.

On the other side of the ledger, Centinela Valley would agree to forfeit the tax dollars it receives from the residential portion of Wiseburn in future bond initiatives. This would reduce its take-home by about 9 percent. (The last bond, passed in 2010, reaped $98 million. A similar one would therefore yield about $90 million.)

Underscoring the mind-numbing complexity of the process is how Tuesday's agreement is just one of three prongs to the plan. The other two involve passage of a piece of state legislation that would essentially codify Wiseburn's concessions and then approval from the California Department of Education.
And the process wouldn't stop there. The next step would involve allowing the voters of the Wiseburn district to approve unification. If all goes as planned, it would all be finished sometime in the year between July 2014 and July 2015.

The leaders of the dissenting elementary districts have several gripes. Chief among them is the idea that Wiseburn would be able to separate without the say of voters in Hawthorne, Lawndale and Lennox.

"I think it should be an area-wide vote," said Ellen Dougherty, superintendent of the Lawndale school district. "There are 20,000 other students that will be affected."

Helen Morgan, superintendent of the K-8 Hawthorne school district, said she also worries that the terms of the current agreement could change under new leaders.

"I don't think anybody here is trying to pull one over," she said. "I think the intention of the Wiseburn community is to honor the bonds that have been passed. But I can't predict the future."

Wiseburn nearly succeeded in extricating itself in a much less compromising way many years ago. In 2004, three years after the process was initiated, the California Board of Education unanimously approved Wiseburn's request to ask its voters to unify. But Centinela Valley gummed the gears by suing the state board on the grounds that Wiseburn hadn't conducted the proper environmental studies.

In 2008, the studies were done and the state board took up the issue again. This time, it ruled that unification would have to be approved by all voters in the Centinela Valley. Wiseburn considers this an impossible hurdle, and the current process is an attempt to satisfy all parties.

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NCLUSD moving to trustee area elections

By Mattos Newspapers

March 13, 2013 | Posted in: News, Schools | 0 Comments

NEWMAN – Faced with the threat of a voting rights lawsuit, the Newman-Crows Landing Unified School District is moving toward trustee-area school board elections.

That transition is spurred by a Latino advocacy group’s contention that the current at-large election system violates state and federal voting rights laws.

A Feb. 6 letter to the district from the Latino Community Roundtable of Stanislaus County demanded that the district take immediate action to abolish the at-large elections and implement trustee zones. Failure to do so, the letter warned, would result in a lawsuit being filed against the district.

Superintendent Ed Felt said several county school districts are taking similar steps to avoid costly litigation.

“To the best of my knowledge, districts which have fought this in court have lost,” Felt commented. “They have lost the expenses involved, and have moved to trustee area elections in the end. When you look at the history of the litigation and the cost to public entities, we just don’t have the type of money to fight this even if we chose to.”

The demand letter from the Roundtable contends that the at-large system does not afford Asian, Latino and African-American residents equal representation in the process. The letter states that the California Voting Rights Act prohibits at-large elections because they “impair the ability of a protected class to elect candidates of its choice or its ability to influence the outcome of an election.”

The letter goes on to contend that the demographics of properly-designed trustee zones would “allow non-white citizens an adequate opportunity to elect candidates of their choice, or to impact the election of board members in future school board elections.”
The letter, signed by Roundtable President Maggie Mejia and Legislative Chairperson Rosalinda Vierra, characterizes the current system, which lacks term limits or campaign finance limits, as “an incumbent protection-voting scheme.”

The shift to trustee-area elections will fundamentally change how voters in the Newman-Crows Landing district elect school board representatives.

Instead of a single, districtwide election held every two years for open school board seats, five trustee zones will be created and each will essentially hold its own election to fill a single board seat. Candidates must reside within the zone, and only voters from the zone can participate in that election.

To prepare for the transition, the school board last week approved a change which pushes the election schedule back one year and gives the district adequate time to create and implement the trustee zones.

As a result, there will be no school board elections this year and the term of each incumbent board member is essentially extended one year.

The terms of Kerry McWilliams and Paul Wallace will now expire in 2014 – the first year zone voting is anticipated. The terms of RoseLee Hurst, Janice Conforti and Tim Bazar will expire in 2016.

The board voted 4-0, with Hurst absent, to reschedule the board elections. Trustees also gave Felt direction to begin the process of moving toward trustee area elections.

“It is pretty inevitable,” Felt conceded.

A group of county schools making the same transition will work collectively on the process to minimize expenses. Still, Felt said, he expects the shift to cost the district about $25,000. Felt said the demand letter came as no surprise.

He said he briefed trustees in executive session last spring as an anticipated litigation matter, and again last week.

While intended to foster diversity, Felt said, one concern with the trustee area elections is that geographic restrictions may in fact limit candidate pools.

“The goal is to give everyone opportunities to get elected, but you can’t force people to run for office,” the superintendent pointed out. “You can create what are considered fair trustee areas, but you still have to have people who are going to be willing to run. It reduces the area to pull those people from.”

School Board President McWilliams noted that the board has had a variety of minority representation in the past. He said no formal analysis has been conducted to determine if racially
polarized voting exists in the district – adding that such a study would be pointless. “It seems like the tide is coming in whether or not we find evidence (of polarized voting),” he commented.

McWilliams said he believes the new format may indeed open up new opportunities for people to participate – but also shared concerns that lack of candidate interest might be a response in some election cycles.

“I don’t necessarily have a problem with it,” he said of trustee area elections. “We may see some benefits, but we may see some burdens as well.”
In a move it is referring to as an “advisement,” but taken as “extortion” by some city officials, a Latino organization is recommending that the pint-sized six square mile town of Oakdale implement district elections for its city council and school board elected offices.

The Latino Community Roundtable, an assembly of elected and appointed officials in Modesto, sent a letter to both the city and school district in February demanding that council members and school board trustees be elected to represent specific districts within the city, replacing the current at-large election process.

When contacted, Maggie Mejia, president of the Latino Community Roundtable, cited the 2001 California Voting Rights Act that made it easier for minority groups to sue governments that use at-large elections on the grounds that they dilute the strength of minority votes.

“If Oakdale does not immediately adopt district elections, we will file a lawsuit to seek judicial relief on behalf of Oakdale residents,” Mejia wrote in the letter to city officials. “We will ask the court to impose district elections immediately, to draw the new district maps and to enjoin any attempts by Oakdale City Council to perpetuate the current election scheme.”

“If we had written a mushy letter with love and kisses, it wouldn’t have been taken seriously,” said Mejia. “I had to send a harsh letter for them to wake up and smell the coffee.”

The sometimes divided city council members of Oakdale are all showing a unified opinion in opposition to the proposal that they’ve all said puts them in a “no-win” situation because of the mandates placed on the much geographically larger and heavily Hispanic populated jurisdictions of Modesto and the Madera School District which have fought and lost in the courts.
“This is a matter of extortion,” said Councilman Don Petersen. “They’re telling us, ‘Do as we tell you or you’re going to spend massive amounts of money to defend your actions.’ I think we’re being forced to do something stupid and spend money we don’t have.”

Petersen said the city would either have to pay money on a consultant to draw up district boundaries or pay an attorney to fight the matter.

Mayor Pat Paul identified a number of problems with the proposal ranging from no one definite “Hispanic area of town” to a contingency if no one from one designated district would run for office.

“How many voters do we have in this town?” Paul asked. “What do we really gain with this? It’s a trap. We don’t have money to fight it and those that have tried, have lost in the courts.”

Councilman Tom Dunlop brought up another hindrance of the plan that would affect a city of Oakdale’s small-in-comparison size.

“What you end up getting is a council representative that doesn’t worry about the city as a whole, but only his district,” said Dunlop. “Citizens get a ‘not-in-my-district’ type representative or someone who starts looking out for only their area’s interests. Politicians then start making deals to support each other’s proposals rather than looking out for the entire city.”

For the entire story, read the March 27 edition of The Leader.
City to study voting patterns

by Nick Rappley | Patterson Irrigator

03.28.13 - 05:15 am

Patterson will find out more about the demographic makeup of the city’s voters, motivated by the threat of a lawsuit from a group of Latino leaders regarding voter rights.

Mayor Luis Molina said that the Patterson City Council in closed session March 19 directed city staff to organize a study to describe what ethnic groups make up the city and where they vote.

“This type of analysis is recommended anytime there is a state voting rights claim,” said Deputy City Attorney Doug White. “It creates a baseline determination to find if you should be concerned or not.”

The Latino Community Roundtable, a group of elected and appointed officials, sent letters to school districts and city councils throughout Stanislaus County — including the Patterson City Council — on Feb. 6. The letters demanded that council members be elected to represent specific districts within the city, replacing the at-large election process.

The letter to the Patterson City Council claimed that the city violates the federal 1965 Voting Rights Act and the 2001 California Voting Rights Act by having at-large, rather than by-district, elections.

The letter also stated that the group would take legal action to ensure district elections were put in place in Patterson, if the council did not act immediately to do so.

White has said that no government has challenged this type of lawsuit successfully, and the monetary damages have been large.

Modesto lost a challenge to a lawsuit making similar claims in 2007 and paid a $3 million settlement to a San Francisco law firm.

The Patterson Joint Unified School District recently decided to institute district elections for its seven
trustees. The change must be approved by the State Board of Education, which is expected in May.

White contends that the demographic information would equip the council to decide whether to change the way council members are elected.

No decision about switching to districts has been made, he said.

The city has not yet selected a firm to conduct the study, he said. A meeting with school district officials is scheduled to look for ways to share study costs with the school district, which is months ahead of the city in the process, White said.

Rod Butler, Patterson city manager, said the city was watching the school district closely and looking for ways to avoid duplicating efforts.

Phil Alfano, superintendent of the Patterson Joint Unified School District, said Tuesday, March 26, that he had not yet been contacted but had some reports he could share.

Alfano said the total bill for the school district’s election switch is expected to be about $15,000, which includes a demographic study of the district and attorney fees.

He said that the school district began work on the issue in the fall, ahead of the demand letters that were sent out.

“The law is pretty clear,” he said. “The only way to avoid being sued for racially polarizing voting is to go to district elections.”

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The Wiseburn school board has found a new site for its future Wiseburn High School. The district plans to renovate the El Segundo location that was recently vacated by Northrop Grumman. As is, the four-story building is so huge you could put one-and-a-half soccer fields on every floor. (Stephen Carr / Staff Photographer)

Just a few months ago, the four-story monolith located in the heart - or shall we say brain - of El Segundo's aerospace corridor was most assuredly a place where the highest-ranking U.S. military officials held secret meetings about espionage and other sensitive intelligence.

But if the Wiseburn school district has its way, the building formerly leased by Northrop Grumman will, in just three years time, become a comprehensive high school complete with
bustling hallways, college-prep classes, athletic events, prom, school plays, cliquey squabbles and all the other trappings of the American tradition.

Regardless of where the school is ultimately situated, Wiseburn High School will be the South Bay's first newly minted comprehensive high school to come online in half a century. (The most recent addition was Rolling Hills High, built on the Palos Verdes Peninsula in 1964 and renamed Peninsula High in 1991.)

Last week, the Wiseburn school board took a major step toward converting the office building into a school by approving the environmental studies and closing escrow on the $46 million sale of the property at 201 N. Douglas St. near El Segundo Boulevard. "When this process is done, we will have one of the best high schools in the nation," asserted Wiseburn school board member Susan Andriacchi. "I've been in this community for 17 years and this has been a topic of conversation since I came, and before, I'm sure."

But the Wiseburn school district might still be one fight away from the finish line.

The city of El Segundo, which stands to lose a significant chunk of tax revenue over the deal, is raising stiff objections, and could very well file a lawsuit. The city has 30 days from Wiseburn's March 21 approval of the project to do so. El Segundo City Manager Greg Carpenter, who submitted a letter of opposition, didn't return multiple calls for comment.

If the Wiseburn school district prevails in occupying the building, which is across the street from the Los Angeles Air Force Base, the resulting wow factor is expected to be significant.

For starters, the edifice is large enough to fit one and a half soccer fields on each of its four floors. The school district would use only about two-thirds of the building and lop off the rest, although it would add a separate auditorium and a gymnasium.

Preliminary renderings of Wiseburn High depict a futuristic building with plenty of natural lighting, an abundance of glass and a square atrium cutting down the middle of all four floors.

"You might have a private conference - nobody is going to be able to hear you, but they are going to see you," said Tom Johnstone, the school district's superintendent. The school will be designed by Gensler, one of the largest architecture firms in the United States. Gensler's credits include the Shanghai Tower in China - which, when completed, will be the second tallest skyscraper in the world. Gensler also has been selected to design Farmers Field, the proposed football stadium in downtown Los Angeles.

Johnstone said Gensler's own downtown Los Angeles headquarters, with its open layout, glassy interior and ample natural lighting, offers a glimpse of the spirit in which Wiseburn High will be built.

"You can see exactly what everybody is working on," he said. "It creates its own synergy and energy."
Since its inception in 1896, the Wiseburn School District has been a K-8 entity located in the Hawthorne neighborhood of Holly Glen and unincorporated Los Angeles County neighborhoods of Del Aire and Wiseburn. The district also extends into the aerospace and commercial district of El Segundo, which has zero residents but is prized by government entities for its extremely lucrative tax base and bonding capacity.

For decades, Wiseburn residents have been keen on converting their school system into a K-12 unified school district with a comprehensive high school.

The district is already home to a twin pair of charter high schools - Da Vinci Science and Da Vinci Design - but these are specialized learning centers that do not offer all of the features of a traditional high school experience. (Both schools will relocate to the new school.) Wiseburn High, by contrast, will have performing arts extracurriculars and sports teams that will compete in California Interscholastic Federation leagues, better known as CIF.

And, Wiseburn officials say, the new school would keep students from scattering to the wind after and before junior high school.

This dissipation happens because Wiseburn families tend to avoid the two comprehensive high schools to which they are assigned - Hawthorne and Lawndale - in the Centinela Valley Union High School District.

"Centinela Valley hasn't provided the education we're looking for for our kids," said Wiseburn school board member Israel Mora. "Since the 1980s, their quality of education has dropped tremendously. They are trying to bring it back up, but it's a struggle for them."

As for the objections lodged by the city of El Segundo, they have centered on the usual technical quibbles over parking, noise and traffic. But Johnstone said it's largely about lost tax revenue.

"It basically takes 13.71 acres off their tax rolls," he said. "They aren't loving that."

He added: "From our perspective, we really want to work things out with the city; we want to get a win-win."

Tax records show that the property owners paid $482,000 in taxes last year; it's unclear how much of that went to the city of El Segundo. Because schools, churches and parks do not pay property taxes in California, if the sale to the Wiseburn school district goes through, the amount will shrink to zero.

To Wiseburn officials, the property is a perfect fit. The multifloor building is stacked on a 2-acre footprint, leaving ample room for parking and athletic fields. Its proximity to aerospace companies will smooth the relationship the district already enjoys with aerospace engineers who volunteer as tutors.

But the city of El Segundo isn't Wiseburn's only obstacle. The site also harbors an underground plume of methane gas that is trapped beneath the parking lot, probably the result of an
underground Chevron oil field. Even though the plume is about 100 yards from the structure, the
gas - whose concentration exceeds the acceptable limits in one area - needs to be diluted via a
venting system in order for the district to appease the state Department of Toxic Substances
Control.

Given its history, the building itself exudes a certain intrigue. Johnstone said it contained several
rooms that existed primarily to host classified meetings - "top secret type stuff."

With the building's handy proximity to not only the Los Angeles Air Force Base but also the
base's research-and-development arm, the nonprofit Aerospace Corp., it's easy to imagine high-
level, closed-door meetings about drone strikes or missile systems.

"It's exciting to be on Douglas Street," Johnstone said. "That's where it all started."

The building was leased by Northrop until January, when the roughly 1,000 employees packed
up and moved into another space owned by the company in Redondo Beach.

"The whole sequestration thing was probably weighing on their head," Johnstone surmised,
referring to the automatic federal spending cuts that took effect March 1.

Also mysterious is the owner of the building. On Jan. 13, it changed hands twice in one day,
from the opaquely named Douglas Property Holdings Co., LLC to Continental Development
Corp. " owned by Richard Lundquist, one of the wealthiest landowners in El Segundo - to
Wiseburn. Even Johnstone doesn't know exactly why the transaction took place in this fashion,
or who "Douglas Property Holders" really is.

In any case, the $46 million to purchase the site and the estimated $32 million it will take to
build the school both come from an $87 million construction bond approved overwhelmingly by
Wiseburn voters in 2010. A good 80 percent of that money comes not from residents but the
businesses in the El Segundo commercial district - a section that includes, in addition to
aerospace companies, other corporate behemoths like Mattel, Xerox and AIG.

This corporate corridor is the chief reason all four of the district's schools are nearly brand new.

"We've been abundantly blessed, and we know it," Johnstone said. "We want to develop the next
generation of engineers."

Johnstone is hoping the school will open in the spring of 2016. That means today's high school
freshmen stand a chance to spend their last couple months of high school in a brand new school.

"We just think it would be an added bonus and a wonderful parting gift - to be in a brand-new,
world-class high school for the last part of their senior year," he said.
Orange County Superior Court Judge Franz E. Miller Tuesday afternoon issued a ruling postponing until July a lawsuit against the city of Anaheim demanding the implementation of a new City Council election system, saying that a committee studying the electoral process should be allowed to finish its work.

The American Civil Liberties Union last year filed a lawsuit on behalf of Latino activists against the city alleging that its at-large council election system violates the 2001 California Voting Rights Act, which requires adequate council representation minorities.

Anaheim is 54 percent Latino, but few council members in the city's history have been Latino. Currently, all five council members are white and hail from either Anaheim Hills the city's affluent Eastern sector or the Colony District, another well-heeled area. The ACLU proposes a switch to a council-districts system, whereby residents would only elect representatives of their districts.

The city challenges the validity of the lawsuit in court documents, arguing that members of minority groups have consistently been elected to City Council. According to the city, ten seats have been up for election since 2002, with seven of those seats filled by either "Asian" or "Hispanic" council members.

One of those council members is former Councilwoman Lorri Galloway, who is Spanish and Filipina, a mix that ACLU attorney Robert Ruben has said doesn't meet the criteria for Latina under the voting rights act.

The city's attorneys argue in court filings that a citizens advisory committee which faces a May 31 deadline on its recommendations -- that was formed to study council elections might conclude that the city should change its council election system. Given that possibility, the court should allow the democratic process its course, the city argues in court documents.
Miller agreed and said that the court should be open to a democratic solution to constitutional questions. With arguments in the U.S. Supreme Court that states should be allowed to legislate same-sex marriage before the nation's highest court steps in, this concept is “well grounded” in the nation’s justice system, Miller said.

“As is the concept justice delayed is justice denied,” replied ACLU attorney Robert Rubin. Miller said that three months “in the scheme of things” seemed reasonable. “It's not lost on me that we're talking about a city that for many years has been Hispanic and has only had three Hispanic council members in that time,” he said.

Miller also said that the citizens advisory committee at the very least would provide information important to a judicial ruling. He referenced national voting rights cases in the 1960s and 1970s that Southern courts wrestled with and said judges in those cases would have benefited from similar studies.

Miller decided to postpone the case and setting a conference with attorneys for July 9 to hear the city's plan for addressing the ACLU's complaint.

ACLU attorneys expressed concern that the city could not have a feasible plan for implementing council districts in time for the 2014 general election.

And even if the city did complete the process, the civil rights lawyers argue in court filings that voters could reject the proposed system, which would leave only five months to litigate the issue before the general election.

Similarly, if voters approved a council-districts plan in June, 2014, that would allow only a few months to carve up the districts and have candidates file before the general election, ACLU attorney Bardis Vakili said after the court proceedings.

“That's cutting it close,” Vakili said. “I'm curious to see how they're going to address that.” Meanwhile, a handful of Latina residents in attendance said they were disappointed by the judge's decision.

Mariana Rivera, a resident in the Guinida neighborhood of South Anaheim, blames Latinos' lack of representation for what she says is an unequal distribution of city resources between areas like Anaheim Hills and the city's mostly working-class flatlands area.

“We feel we don't have so much time. We need our voices to be heard now,” Rivera said.

Please contact Adam Elmahrek directly at aelmahrek@voiceofoc.org and follow him on Twitter: twitter.com/adamelmahrek.
Modesto leaders weigh in on district voting progress

George A. Petruakis: It could be worse

The lopsided passage of Measure N in 2008 by Modestans brought immediate benefits to the city of Modesto.

When more than 70 percent of Modesto voters implemented district elections, it helped bring to an end expensive litigation the city faced under the California Voting Rights Act.

As The Bee reported on Feb. 7, 2008, the city had spent more than $1.7 million fighting the 2004 lawsuit. Appealed all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, the adoption of Measure N stopped that spending.

The measure also boosted the respect of voters for City Hall.

Pre-election polling conducted by the campaign committee for Measure M, a companion to N, showed that while individual city council members — and certainly Mayor Jim Ridenoir — were popular, the Modesto City Council as a collective entity was not. Also, many voters felt Modesto was on the wrong track.

The passage of the two measures brought forward by the Charter Review Committee assuaged concerns in the short run.

How have district elections worked in Modesto since these early benefits?

In preparing my December testimony for the city of Anaheim's Advisory Committee on Elections, I had the opportunity to assess the results so far.

Some findings:

The value of a vote diverges greatly in Modesto. If you live in the low-turnout Modesto district where just over 1,000 people vote, your vote arguably is worth more than 4.5 times what it would be in the four high-turnout districts where about 4,600 to 4,700 voters vote.

If you wanted more minority candidates elected to office, you have been disappointed so far. Perhaps not enough attention has been paid to the Citizens' Districting Commission, created by Measure N to draw the district lines. Any politician knows that district lines can seal their fate.

Finally, while the barriers to election have fallen significantly since it takes a lot less time and money to effectively campaign, the number of candidates running in open seats has often been less than under the previous at-large system.

These results may change over time.

Also testifying at the Anaheim hearing was Loyola Law School Professor Justin Levitt. In providing guidance on the California Voting Rights Act, Levitt cited evidence that voting in historically disadvantaged neighborhoods should increase over time as individuals learn that their vote now "matters."

In addition, he schooled Anaheim in the more exotic remedies available under the California Voters Right Act that allow the imposition of European-style (and now San Francisco-style) voting systems on all of us.

District elections may not yet be working in Modesto as intended, but it could be worse. Much worse.

Petruakis, a Modesto lawyer, chaired the most recent Modesto Charter Review Committee.

Joan Clendenin: Follow lead of Ceres school board

The issue of school districts and cities switching from at-large to by-district elections is emotionally charged and riddled with conflict and hazards.

tp://www.modbee.com/2013/04/03/v-print/2646635/district-votings-progress.html

4/10/2013
The city of Modesto was challenged by the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights, using the loosely worded language of the California Voting Rights Act, to implement some form of by-district elections. The city eventually lost the court battle and began a process that resulted in district elections. Now the county school boards have to deal with the same band of lawyers.

I opposed the change because I believed that collegiality was as important as any benefit from the change. Almost every vote cast by the City Council affects the entire city. Why wouldn't you want the decision-makers to have been elected citywide?

I'm also offended by the process. The Voting Rights Act allows an out-of-area group of lawyers to send "demand" letters to cities and school districts to force them to make a decision that should be made by the local jurisdictions at a time of their own choosing. I believe in the democratic process and that citizen governing boards need to have "fair community representation."

The decision to run for any elective office is a personal decision. Citizens run or don't run for myriad personal and political reasons. I believe the reason Latinos and African-Americans are not on these boards because running for office is an expensive and time-consuming process — and that's before you win. There are some who argue that even if elected, they would be outvoted by a white majority.

A recent demand letter prompted six Stanislaus County school districts to postpone their school board elections until November 2014. They acted both too late and too soon. The members of those boards whose terms expire in 2013 granted themselves an extra year in office. Was the vote to change the election date a conflict of interest? Will the votes they cast next year be challenged? Empire, smartly, is studying its options.

I believe the Ceres School District board elections process is the fairest way to go given the CVRA objective, which is to give "minority voters a better chance of electing candidates of their choice." The Ceres blend of two at-large seats and the remainder by-district elections produces a balanced board. My advice to those six districts and others that are dealing with this issue — take a look at Ceres.

**Clendenin, a delegate to the 2012 Republican National Convention, has long been active in Stanislaus County Republican politics.**

**Dale Butler: Greater diversity will come soon**

Some of the arguments put forth by many who supported by-district elections during the 2008 City elections were that 1) the makeup of our council would become more diverse, 2) campaign-related costs would be reduced, and 3) constituents would have improved representation and access to city government.

While council diversity (gender and ethnic) under by-district elections has not improved compared to most pre-2009 at-large councils, I believe the future bodes well for these and other underrepresented groups. This is especially true in districts with high underrepresented populations, as long as constituents vote.

As for lower campaign-related costs under by-district elections, analysis should show, I believe, that smaller geographical areas mean reduced expenditures for staff, materials, and travel. Some candidates will still splurge to get elected, but the fact remains that higher spending is no longer necessary, unless, of course, one is running in countywide, state and federal races.

By-district elections have also improved representation and access for constituents to city services. Constituents tend to feel more at ease in expressing concerns to councilmembers who live in their neighborhoods, and councilmembers tend to do more outreach within smaller districts.

Litigation against the city of Modesto aside, I am glad voters approved by-district elections in 2008. While a more inclusive and diverse council has not yet materialized, I have every expectation that this will happen soon.

**Butler is a Latino community leader.**

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Citrus College Board member Gary Woods accused of living outside of Azusa

By Melissa Masatani, Staff Writer twitter.com/mmasatani San Gabriel Valley Tribune

On the heels of recent allegations that the Citrus College Board of Trustees violated the state's open meeting law, the teachers' union leveled new accusations against longtime Trustee Gary Woods at Tuesday afternoon's board meeting.

Representatives of the Community College Association, the community college affiliate of the California Teachers Association, helped conduct a nearly two-month investigation into Woods, who is accused of living outside of the area he represents.

CCA President Ron Reel and Citrus Faculty Association President John Fincher spoke during the public comment portion of the meeting, presenting evidence they say proves that Woods lives in Sierra Madre rather than in Azusa.

Woods, whose four-year term expires Nov. 30, has served on the board since 1982 and was most recently re-elected in 2009. He represents Area 1, which covers Azusa, Covina, Glendora and Irwindale, and lists an apartment at 450 N. Soldano Ave. in Azusa as his residence.

Information from the CCA, posted at fgregarywoods.com, shows a grant deed from April 2011 for Gary Woods and Guo Ping Wu at a residence in Sierra Madre. The site also has photo and video surveillance of the Sierra Madre residence, purportedly showing Woods' vehicle at the home at night and in the morning.

The California Education Code states that an elected member of a community college governing board must live within established trustee areas, clarifying that the person's listed address must be their "domicile," or main place of residence.

"Everybody has a domicile and that's what counts," Citrus faculty president Fincher said in an interview. "You have to be domiciled in the district to run for the district."

Woods denied Sierra Madre was his primary residence.

"I own several properties and I can live where I want," he said. "Azusa has been my main domicile since '81 or '82."

The union's investigation was spurred in January by a letter from a former postal employee, saying that he remembered delivering mail to an apartment in Azusa that would only be emptied every few weeks. The letter prompted the CTA to hire a private investigator and attorney, according to the website.

In his comments, Fincher proposed the board retain legal counsel and, if the group's findings prove to be correct, vote to make Woods' position vacant at the April 2 meeting.
"We have always been concerned that the people of Azusa are not being fairly represented by one of their own," Fincher said. "The whole election process is in jeopardy if somebody can simply find a place, run for office in that city and have no roots or connection to that city."

After the meeting, Woods warned the union to back off.

"I don't think it's the board's place (to retain legal counsel) ... If they want to take action, I'll take action against them," he said.