

VVC considers shifting to by-district election system

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VICTORVILLE - Bracing for possible allegations of unfairness within its at-large election system, Victor Valley Community College District has brought on a consultant to evaluate whether to shift to a by-district model.

Having already seen Victorville city officials receive a letter from local attorney Bob Conaway - who also ran unsuccessfully for a VVC board seat in the November election - citing issues with the city's election process, VVC officials thought it best to be proactive in order to avoid possible lawsuit.

The college joins the growing ranks of California cities, community colleges and school districts under pressure to change the way its officials are elected, as advocates arguing for greater minority representation are seeking to have officials elected by geographic district rather than a vote from the entire populace.

Racially diverse communities which conduct at-large elections yet retain few minority officeholders have found themselves under fire of the California Voting Rights Act, which plaintiffs are using to claim the election process is subject to racially polarized voting.

Paul Mitchell, owner of Redistricting Partners, which has helped more than 30 California local agencies redistrict, attended a recent VVC board meeting to explain the process.

"If the college was to entertain the idea of adopting a redistricting process under the California Voting Rights Act, one of the jobs for the trustees and the community would be first to help us construct the building blocks," Mitchell said at the December meeting. "In a traditional redistricting process, those blocks are called communities of interest ...; The first kind of community of interest is rather static - the geographic boundaries within your jurisdiction. The second type, which is more subjective, is looking at populations important to the district."

These populations can include various workforces, people seeking a college degree and the group which Mitchell said "meets the threshold under state law in this district" - the Latino population. Under the Voting Rights Act, the college must ensure that "the district lines that are drawn don't dilute their vote," Mitchell said.

The board would also have the option to convert to a seven-member board from its current five "without having to do anything extra in order to facilitate this process," Mitchell said.

He went on to share with the board several drafts of district maps with differing lines drawn to consider.

Although recently re-elected trustee Brandon Wood shared he doesn't like the idea of districting, he said, "If I have to go along, I'll go along."

"There are people out there who found out they can have personal gain by causing organizations trouble where they don't need that," Wood said. "I feel like this districting is the same kind of nonsense - creating a problem where there wasn't a problem. I don't think we have a problem in this community. I don't think anyone is not being allowed a fair chance of having a seat up here."

Fellow trustee Dennis Henderson shared his sentiment, adding that they "have had two people of color on this board."

"If they want to run, all they have to do is put their name in ...; spin the roulette," Henderson said. "Nobody cares up here what your color is."

Mitchell said Redistricting Partners' intent is to "start a conversation," which trustee Joseph W. Brady suggested would be better suited for a two-hour public study session. As VVC officials continue to consider redistricting, Wood re-agendized the topic for a future meeting.

"My hope is you can have this conversation and I get an email that says, 'Let's get these maps again, and can you do a plan that does not split X community or maintains this one school district,' etcetera," Mitchell said. "This is not anything close to the final presentation."

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