

Status quo for Board of Supervisors as hundreds turn out to discuss redistricting

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LOS ANGELES - Despite a lawsuit threat from civil rights groups, a divided Board of Supervisors on Tuesday decided to keep its current district boundaries mostly the same, rejecting two proposals to boost the political clout of Latinos.

An overflow crowd of about 1,300 showed up for the redistricting vote, with many of them bused in by unions and activist groups that were backing plans to create a second Latino supervisorial district.

So many people showed up that the county set up four overflow rooms and an outdoor tent seating 250 on the lawn of the administration building. About 930 people had signed up to speak on the topic.

Supporters of creating a second Latino district said the status quo plan would violate the federal Voting Rights Act by diluting the political power of a protected group.

But county officials said the plan they approved meets federal requirements.

"The county believes Latinos already have an equal opportunity to elect a person of their own choosing," Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky said. "The Voting Rights Act doesn't allow race to be an exclusive consideration."

Supervisor Gloria Molina was the lone vote against the status quo, which gives only her 1st District a Latino majority among voting-age residents.

"I just really think

it's a shame," Molina said. "We told them they had an opportunity to make history, and now it's going to have to go in a whole different track."

The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund has threatened to sue if the board did not create an additional Latino district that reflects the county's demographics.

Latinos make up 48 percent of county residents, and 34 percent of county voters.

Laura Brill, counsel for the county, said the map that maintains the status quo is legal.

"There's no doubt that the county has to comply with the Voting Rights Act, and that means to create a fair opportunity for minorities to elect candidates of choice, but it does not mean that every time there's some difference in how different groups vote, that you have an obligation to create a majority/minority district in order to make that happen," she said.

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The 4-1 vote broke an earlier deadlock. The board initially failed to muster the supermajority needed to approve any of the three plans, meaning the decision would have been left in the hands of an independent panel composed of the district attorney, sheriff and auditor.

Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, however, reconsidered his previous "no" vote, and eventually cast his lot with Supervisors Don Knabe, Michael Antonovich and Yaroslavsky for the plan that only makes minor shifts in the current boundaries, also called "A3."

Molina and Ridley-Thomas had each submitted plans that would have carved out a new district in which Latinos would make up the majority of voting-age residents.

No to T1 and S2

In Molina's proposal, called T1, it would have been the 3rd District, currently headed by Yaroslavsky, who will be termed out next year.

In Ridley-Thomas' proposal, called S2, it would have been the 4th District, headed by Knabe, who is seeking re-election to his final term.

Both plans mustered only two votes – Molina and Ridley-Thomas – and failed outright.

Ridley-Thomas said his decision to eventually support the redistricting map that maintains the status quo was a practical move to achieve closure. He said it did not mean he has changed his mind about the need to create a second Latino majority district.

"I believe that S2 or T1 would be the correct redistricting map reflecting appropriate communities of interest and, in fact, complying with the Voting Rights Act," he said.

But with a lack of consensus on those plans, and the likelihood the issue will end up in the federal courts anyway, he decided to go with the status

quo plan for the sake of moving forward.

Members of the public who showed up for the meeting came from all walks of life - elected officials, immigration rights activists, students, environmentalists, business leaders, union leaders, community leaders. They hailed from Lynwood to Pomona, and included various racial and ethnic groups such as Tongans, Cambodians, and Thais.

"I support the Molina and Ridley-Thomas proposal," said Pico Rivera Councilman Gustavo Camacho in an interview Tuesday after he spoke at the meeting. "After 20 years we need to make adjustments based on changes in demographics. We've become accustomed to our supervisors and what they've done. They've done great work. Nobody likes change but change also can become good."

El Monte Mayor Andre Quintero also backed plans to create a second Latino district.

"There is nothing more important than an opportunity to grow and thrive in school," Quintero said. "We may say that we are a colorblind society but there are still deep inequalities between schools in the San Gabriel Valley and the Westside.



"It is clear from the Census that Latino population will continue to grow. We should create a second Latino-influenced district. You have the chance to create a new legacy."

Duarte Councilman John Fasana supported the plan proposed by Supervisor Don Knabe.

"We believe it's important that our communities of Monrovia and Duarte continue to be represented by the same supervisor," Fasana said.

"I'm here to support the plans from Gloria Molina and Mark Ridley-Thomas," said Benjamin Martinez Jr., a resident of the unincorporated Los Nietos area. "It would be foolish to support only one plan. We have to be realistic about the change in population. Supervisor Molina has done good for our district. We appreciate her efforts. I've seen the changes in the population in Los Angeles County, Los Angeles city and California. The new maps follow the letter of the law."

Before the vote, Margarita Lopez, 25, a student at Cal State Northridge, urged the board to "make history, not repeat history."

"I ask you to allow all, especially the youth present today, to walk away with pride that their presence was not in vain," she said. "Don't forget that this same youth are our future voters and will remember you as either representatives making a vote in the interest of the community - or, sadly, in the interest of your own pockets."

Opposition to change

James P. Tung, a resident and member of the Chinese Association of Rowland Heights, opposed the creation of a second Latino majority district.

"I live in a community with 499 homes in Rowland Heights," he said. "Many of our families are Chinese and we do not expect to have a Chinese

supervisor."

Richard Packard, chairman of the political action committee of the San Fernando branch of the NAACP, warned that creating a second Latino majority district would disenfranchise African-Americans.

"T1 and S2 plans actually diminish and dilute the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to the initial benefactors of this act," he told the board. "The proposed intrusion that's represented by S2 and T1 will divide the African-American majority voting bloc in the San Fernando Valley among three supervisorial districts as opposed to only two."

Under the approved redistricting plan, the 1st District's voting-age population would be nearly 60 percent Latino. In the four other districts, Latinos would constitute between 23 percent and 34 percent of the voting-age population.

Supervisor Don Knabe, who is expected to benefit from the status quo plan in his next re-election bid, said he can represent the Latino community fairly.

"There have been a lot of things written about me lately, and I can confirm some of them: I'm white, I'm Republican, and I live in Cerritos. But

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the suggestion that ... I cannot fairly represent people who do not look like me is frankly insulting," Knabe said.

Staff Writers Mike Sprague and Dakota Smith contributed to this story.

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