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L.A. County rejects bid for second Latino-majority district

Supervisors, split on the issue, approve a redistricting map that leaves lines largely unchanged, protecting incumbents. But the move sets the stage for a costly legal battle.

By Rong-Gong Lin II and Jason Song, Los Angeles Times

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After hours of emotional testimony from hundreds of speakers, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved a political redistricting map late Tuesday largely preserving the status quo, protecting incumbents and rejecting demands that the board create a second Latino-majority district.

Tuesday's 4-to-1 vote sets the stage for a costly legal battle, pitting the county against Latino activists who are expected to accuse the supervisors of protecting white incumbents at the expense of the voting rights of Latinos.

They and Supervisor Gloria Molina argue that the county is repeating mistakes of the past. Two decades ago, federal courts sided with Latino activists and found white county supervisors for decades had systematically split growing Latino neighborhoods to protect incumbents and prevent the emergence of a Latino challenger. The voting rights lawsuit cost \$14 million and the county was forced to adopt new maps, which led to the election of Molina. She was the first nonwhite supervisor elected to the board since the late 19th century.

In the end, Mark Ridley-Thomas, a black supervisor who had been allied with Molina, switched sides and supported a plan by Supervisor Don Knabe. That plan largely preserves the five existing districts. Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky, a possible L.A. mayoral candidate, and Michael D. Antonovich also backed Knabe's plan.

Ridley-Thomas had been an outspoken backer of a second Latino-majority district, invoking memories of the 1960s civil rights movement. "They were not attempting to be apologists for the status quo," he said. "They gave new definition to patriotism."

But he also said he didn't want the board to deadlock, which would turn the decision over to a trio of other countywide elected officials — Dist. Atty. Steve Cooley, Sheriff Lee Baca and Assessor John R. Noguez — with no experience in drawing supervisors' districts.

"Rather than create another arena for debate with untested policymakers in uncharted waters ... we just need to get on with it. You can fully anticipate there will be legal challenges," Ridley-Thomas said.

"We did all we could to put the facts on the table. And I would've hoped they would've listened, but somehow the facts were insignificant to them," said Molina, who said she understood Ridley-Thomas' vote.

In a speech before the vote, Molina said Latinos needed better representation on the board because of discrimination against Latinos in the county dating to 1880. She cited mandated segregation of Mexican American students into Mexican schools, improper seizure of Mexican American homes and lands through the courts, the

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alleged sterilization of Spanish-speaking women at Los Angeles County-USC Medical Center without their consent and construction of freeways through heavily Latino neighborhoods.

"Given the Latinos' long history of discrimination and political exclusion, this board has a duty under the Voting Rights Act to draw district lines that do not perpetuate that exclusion," Molina said.

Plans to create a new supervisorial district with a majority of potential voters who are Latino would have placed one white incumbent — either Knabe or Yaroslavsky — in a dramatically new district. That drew loud protests from their constituents.

"I'm white, I'm a Republican, I live in Cerritos, and yes, I'm running for reelection. But the bare suggestion that I can only provide an outstanding level of service for the people who look like me is frankly insulting," said Knabe, who has represented his coastal and southeastern district since 1996.

Yaroslavsky argued that Latinos would have "an equal opportunity to elect a person of their own choosing" in what will be Knabe's new district under the adopted plan. That district will grow to 32.8% Latino from 31.6%.

"This isn't perfect, but it's certainly better" than what Molina and Ridley-Thomas proposed, Yaroslavsky said.

Tensions ran high throughout the day. Molina supporters waved signs reading, "Follow the numbers. Follow the law." Those in favor of the current districts clapped after their supporters spoke.

Los Angeles City Council President Eric Garcetti, who is running for mayor, and Councilman Ed Reyes voiced their support for a second Latino-majority district.

Meanwhile, some Asian groups warned that creating a second Latino-dominant district would dilute their influence and separate Chinatown from the heavily Asian San Gabriel Valley area.

Others said that race and ethnicity should not play a factor in redistricting.

Rowland Heights resident James Tung backed Knabe's plan, saying "a supervisor is elected to represent everyone in his or her district.... It doesn't matter if the resident is black, brown, white, Chinese or Hispanic.... Our supervisor should be one who listens to the needs of the entire community."

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