

Visalia Unified School District heads for district elections

Citizens committee studies details, pending census data

BY GERALD CARROLL • gcarroll@visalia.gannett.com • March 3, 2010

Visalia Unified School District officials are committed to converting the at-large system for electing school board trustees to a district-based system, officials said Tuesday.

"That's a done deal," said Randy Groom, director of administrative services for the district. "The only part left is how to go about having a district election. We want to do it right."

Though trustees now reside in specific areas, they're voted on by the population at large.

Setting boundaries for seven voting districts will be the main challenge, said Groom, who has been meeting with a 35-member citizens committee since January. The group's next meeting is March 16.

Supporters of district elections say that such a system allows all residents to have a voice. Underrepresented minority groups have sought such elections through the Voting Rights Act.

"District elections are mandated if it can be shown that a certain area's voting patterns have been racially polarized," said Joaquin Avila, a Seattle-based voting rights attorney who's been the force behind a movement to force the Tulare Health Care District to switch to district-based voting.

Visalia Unified's districts would not be based on ethnic or cultural factors, however, Groom said. The boundaries would be based on population data gathered as part of this spring's federal census effort, he said.

"Hopefully, the census data will be back in time for us to look at district boundaries for early 2011," Groom said.

Not everyone is enthusiastic about district elections

in Visalia, however. Visalia Vice Mayor Amy Shuklian, whose Visalia City Council fills seats through at-large elections, said district-based elections tend to isolate elected officials over time and slow down citywide initiatives.

"It wouldn't work for the City Council," she said.

Visalia Councilman Steve Nelsen agrees.

"I live in north Visalia and would be bound to the wishes of the voters here under a district system," Nelsen said. "I would rather represent all the voters of Visalia."

The school district, however, is committed to the district-based system.

Karl Kildow, a former English teacher who is now a full-time organizer and negotiator for the district's teachers union, favors the district approach. Individual schools tend to have more of a voice under a such a system, he said.

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