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## City looks at change to five Council districts

By ALLISON GATLIN Valley Press Staff Writer

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PALMDALE — The City Council, on Wednesday, chose not to move forward with the redistricting process just completed and instead moved to look at changing the Council format from four Council districts and a mayor elected by residents at-large to five Council districts, with the mayor's position rotating among all five.

The city recently completed the decennial process of redrawing district boundaries, when the Council, on Feb. 16, selected a map with new boundaries for the four districts.

That decision itself was controversial, as the Council chose not to approve a map recommended by the Council-appointed Advisory Redistricting Commission, instead choosing one created by consulting demographer NDC. The biggest difference in the map chosen and those recommended is that it did not place two incumbent Council members — Austin Bishop and Richard Loa — in the same district, as two of the recommended maps did. The third map recommended by the Commission would swap the two councilmembers' district designations.

On Wednesday, the Council was scheduled to vote on the ordinance that would codify the new boundaries.

Instead, they decided to seek new maps entirely, with five districts, and bypass the Commission entirely.

"Ultimately, it will be us choosing that map," Councilmember Juan Carrillo said in making the motion, noting the Council did not follow the Commission's recommendation before, and he is not sure they would be willing to weigh in again, or that it could be done within the time constraints.

The Council, on a 4-1 vote, with Mayor Steve Hofbauer dissenting, directed staff to hire a new demographer to create several new maps with five districts that meet the federal and state election requirements, and to have them prepared for Council to choose from by the April 17 redistricting deadline.

"I think we made a very definitive move to create an at-large seat," Hofbauer said, adding that about 80% to 90% of the constituent concerns he deals with come from the opposite side of the city from where he lives.

"Let's call it what it is: when you have a rotating position, everything is the last guys' fault and you only have to wait a few months to dump it on somebody else," he said.

It was not clear, on Thursday, if contracting with a new demographer would require a process of requesting and evaluating proposals.

Nor was it immediately clear how public hearing requirements could be met on a short timeline. During the regular redistricting process, the city must hold at least three public hearings prior to finalizing a map, and maps must be published for five to seven days before final adoption.

"I think it's something that's wise to look into, when we start talking about making sure things are fair and balanced," Councilmember Austin Bishop said.

The change to five districts has been brought up in the past, most recently during the discussion to approve a map, on Feb. 16.

Attorney Kevin Shenkman, who successfully sued the city, in 2013, to force it to move to district representation to comply with the state Voting Rights Act, sent a letter to the city, dated Jan. 16, stating "the failure to adopt a five-district map leaves the City of Palmdale vulnerable to further litigation for violating the California Voting Rights Act, particularly in light of the results of the at-large elections of 2018 and 2020."

The letter cites the losses of mayoral candidates V. Jesse Smith, in 2018, and Xavier Flores, in 2020, as examples of how the Black and Latino vote is diluted in the at-large mayoral election.

Shenkman is also representing former city manager J.J. Murphy in his claim against the city.

Shenkman phoned into the meeting, on Wednesday, to urge the Council to move to five districts, without the proposed step of a future presentation by staff about what such a change would entail. He proposed the steps the Council ultimately took, "so that we could have a lawful, fair election that complies with the California Voting Rights Act this November."

Flores, speaking for the coalition of Latino organizations known as ALVA which had its own map considered during the redistricting process, supported a move to five districts.

"It is our opinion that the current at-large election for mayor in the City of Palmdale is in violation of the Voting Rights' protected classes, namely Latinos and African Americans," he said. "It is our belief that racially polarized voting continues in the City of Palmdale, keeping Latinos and African Americans from electing a mayoral candidate of their choice."

Some members of the public questioned the timing of the move, after the city had completed a months-long redistricting process and with little time before the deadline.

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