



San Mateo Considers Moving to District Elections

City Council Evaluates Options to Create Districts Following Receipt of Letter Asserting Violation of California Voting Rights Act

San Mateo, CA — The San Mateo City Council will be considering options for transitioning to district elections and initiate a robust community-engagement initiative that will influence how voters elect future council members.

The City received a certified letter from attorney Scott J. Rafferty asserting that the City’s current at-large council member electoral system may violate the California Voting Rights Act (the “CVRA”) (Elections Code §§ 14025-14032) and stating that the City should voluntarily change to a district-based election system for electing City Council Members. Upon receipt of such a letter, the City could agree to transition to district elections, or be forced to defend against a lawsuit asserting a CVRA violation.

The City of San Mateo currently employs an at-large elections system, which means voters of the entire City elect the five City Council members. A district-based election is one in which the City is divided into separate districts, each with one City Council member who resides in the district and is chosen by the voters in that particular district.

On Monday, June 21, 2021, the City Council will meet to consider a resolution affirming the City’s intent to move to district elections. The process and timing for establishing districts is controlled by federal and state laws. To comply, the City will be required to identify the number of districts, adopt a map, determine the election sequencing and hold a minimum of five public hearings.

Under the CVRA, after a city adopts a resolution of intent to move to district elections it has 90 days to finalize the district map. However, a city may negotiate for an extension. The City of San Mateo will likely request an extension to allow for more robust public outreach and to incorporate the Census 2020 demographic data that is expected to be released later this year.

The transition to district elections has become increasingly common in the state and San Mateo County, as attorneys have sued local cities and school districts alleging there is evidence of racially polarized voting in at-large electoral systems. Under the CVRA, minimal evidence of racially polarized voting can result in a court ordering a change from at-large voting to district-based voting.

If the Council adopts a resolution of intent to move to district elections, the City will embark on a robust community engagement and communications initiative to gather input on how the City’s district map should be drawn. The City will also contract with a professional demographer to assist in the process.

The upcoming Council meeting begins 7 p.m., Monday, June 21, 2021. Instructions on how to join and the agenda will be on the Public Meeting portal: www.cityofsanmateo.org/publicmeetings.

More information will be provided as soon as it is available. Updates can be found on the City’s new District web page: www.cityofsanmateo.org/districtelections