

COMMUNITY NEWS
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Help Create San Mateo's First District Map

Community Outreach Begins on Transition to City Council District Elections

San Mateo, CA — After receiving a demand letter alleging the City's current at-large election system violates the California Voting Rights Act, the City is beginning a major community engagement initiative to transition to district elections with the goal of completing the process by Nov. 15, 2021.

While the short timeframe is prompted in part by threat of a lawsuit, the City Council this week approved extending the outreach schedule to allow for use of the latest 2020 Census data and additional public participation opportunities through a variety of in-person and online methods.

Creation of the City's first district election map will transform how voters elect future City Council members. The City would be split into districts, with voters in each district electing one City Council member who lives in that district. The first by-district Council election would take place in November 2022. Currently, voters across the entire City elect all five City Council members through an at-large elections system.

"Shifting to district elections is transformational for the San Mateo community and empowering residents with more opportunities to determine their election system is critical," said San Mateo Mayor Eric Rodriguez. "This extended timeline allows us to hear from more residents and use the latest 2020 Census data expected to be released in September."

The extended outreach schedule includes five virtual public hearings, five in-person community workshops, online mapping tools the public can use remotely, and pop-up outreach at various locations. Bilingual outreach and engaging typically underrepresented communities are priorities, and the City will also connect with various stakeholder groups to encourage broad participation.

The first phase of public engagement will be to collect input to help define local "Communities of Interest." This includes asking residents for feedback on their neighborhood's geography, their community's common social or economic interests, and how they're affected by policy decisions made by the City Council. During the second phase of engagement, residents can draw maps for how they think districts should be divided in San Mateo, before the Council considers approval of a final map. The City has also hired professional demographer Redistricting Partners to assist in the process.

Residents can learn more and sign up to get involved on the City's new District Elections web page: www.cityofsanmateo.org/districtelections.

Background on Litigation & Negotiations

On May 24, 2021, the City received a demand letter from attorney Scott Rafferty alleging that the City's at-large election system may violate the California Voting Rights Act, CVRA. On June 21, 2021 the Council adopted a resolution of intent to transition to district elections.

The City has been attempting to negotiate an agreement with Rafferty for an extension of the 90-day transition schedule outlined in the CVRA, as the deadline would have lapsed on Sept. 20, 2021 just days before release of the 2020 Census data. While the negotiations have thus far been unsuccessful, the

Council felt it would be a detriment to the public to rush through a process to establish districts, then have to immediately begin the process to redistrict once the new Census information is released.

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. While the City does not believe there is local evidence of racially-polarized voting, 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.

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