

Civil rights groups oppose Isle at-large council plan

Isle at-large council plan under fire

Four civil rights groups contend U.S. has twice rejected the system

HARVEY RICE

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GALVESTON — Four civil rights groups Friday opposed Galveston's efforts to return to a political system that the **U.S. Justice Department** twice has rejected as diluting minority voting influence.

The opposition came in the form of a letter to the Justice Department objecting to a plan approved by voters in 1998, but never implemented, that would create two at-large council seats and four elected by precinct. Under the current system, all six council members are elected from precincts; the mayor is elected citywide.

"The at-large systems have been struck down all over the state of Texas because it discriminates against folks," said **Steve McIntyre**, spokesman for Gulf Coast Interfaith.

Other organizations signing the letter are the **NAACP**, the **Galveston County Coalition for Justice** and the Galveston Northside Taskforce, a group formed after Hurricane Ike to make sure the black community was not left out of the recovery effort.

'We can't get elected'

The president of the local chapter of the **League of United Latin American Citizens**, **Anna Olivares**, could not be reached for comment, but Gulf Coast Interfaith official Joe Compian said Olivares would submit the letter to her board of directors before signing it.

David Miller, president of the local NAACP chapter, said the at-large seats are discriminatory because most white voters won't vote for minorities.

"Locally and in Galveston County we can't get elected," he said.

The **Galveston City Council** instructed attorney **C. Robert Heath**, whose Austin law firm has been hired to design Galveston's redistricting plan, to ask the Justice Department to withdraw objections it made to the plan twice before, Heath said.

The current system is the result of a lawsuit settled in 1993. The lawsuit argued that the at-large election system used then discriminated against minorities.

Five years later voters amended the city charter to require that two council members be elected at large.

What 'voters approved'

Heath said the Justice Department under former President **Bill Clinton** rejected the plan because of the at-large districts. The city resubmitted the plan, known as the 4-2-1 plan, during redistricting for the 2000 census and it was again rejected, this time under former President **George W. Bush**, he said.

Heath said the city was under no legal obligation to resubmit the 4-2-1 plan, but the council wanted to carry out the will of the voters.

"The council has authorized the submission of a plan because that's what the voters approved, not because of any preference of theirs," said City Clerk **Douglas Godinich**, who is leading citizen participation in designing the redistricting plan.

Chances are slim that the Justice Department will change its mind, said Charles "Rocky" Rhodes, a professor at South Texas School of Law.

"When the Justice Department under two different presidents came to that same conclusion - two presidents coming from different sides of the political spectrum - from that standpoint it seems unlikely that the Justice Department is going to withdraw those objections," Rhodes said.

harvey.rice@chron.com

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