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New supervisorial map divides Menlo Park

by Dave Boyce

Menlo Park is one of four communities in San Mateo County that will have two representatives on the Board of Supervisors when the recently approved remapping of the county's five supervisorial districts goes into effect in June 2014.

In a unanimous vote on Oct. 22, the board adopted a new map that divides Menlo Park along El Camino Real, with Supervisor Don Horsley's District 3 to the west and Supervisor Warren Slocum's District 4 to the east.

Menlo Park joins Belmont, San Bruno and South San Francisco in being divided. "Two supervisors that care about Menlo Park? I think that's an advantage," Mr. Horsley said.

The board's action concluded months of community effort that included five public meetings. A board-appointed advisory committee chose three maps for the supervisors to consider.

In settling a lawsuit by the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights that demanded an end to county-wide elections for individual supervisors - a change that voters approved with Measure B in November 2012 -- the Board of Supervisors agreed to consider whether district boundaries should change and appointed a nine-person committee to engage the public on this question.

It's noteworthy that San Mateo County is now a majority-minority county. When taken together, the populations of the Asian, Latino and African-American communities constitute 53 percent of the county's population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. But the ethnic make-up of the board, with few exceptions over the years, has been white, and that is the case for the current board.

Will the map change the board's ethnicity? When supervisors ran for election countywide, they had to reach 350,000 voters and spend around \$500,000 or have high name recognition to win, Supervisor Dave Pine told the Almanac. With district elections (only the voters in each district will elect that district's supervisor), candidates will have a shot if they can raise \$50,000 to \$100,000, have a willingness to work hard, and a record of public service, Mr. Pine said.

Using each map the board considered, a demographer working with the committee tested hypothetical results for Measure B. "What was remarkable is that (the results in districts 3 and 4) were virtually unchanged," Mr. Pine said.

Redrawing districts

The law requires districts to be approximately equal in population, perhaps the most straightforward factor to consider when redrawing an electoral map. In deciding on district boundaries, officials have to juggle topography; geography; a territory's cohesiveness, contiguity, integrity and compactness; and its communities of interest.

Communities of interest are "building blocks," demographer Douglas Johnson said at a June 18 community meeting in East Palo Alto. "What we're looking for are building blocks that we can put together into districts. So it may be a set of cities, or it may be a couple of cities and neighborhoods from larger cities; whatever you define as your community of interest that makes sense."

The factor with the highest priority among San Mateo County supervisors, according to Mr. Pine: city limits. And the board had encouragement. "It's certainly the case that, almost without exception, the cities advocated vigorously not to be split," Mr. Pine said. But some splitting was necessary, and deciding which cities to split "is a very difficult issue to parse through," he added.

City boundaries should not have been the top priority, said attorney Robert Rubin of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights. "City boundaries are sixth or seventh on the priority list and (the board) elevated it to number 1 by not creating a coalition district of Asians, Latinos and African Americans in District 1."

Is a city a community of interest? "That's a good question," Mr. Pine said. "I believe the board felt that cities were communities of interest that we should try to preserve where possible." He added: "In their perfect world (speaking of the Lawyers' Committee) they would have tried to put everyone east of (U.S. 101) into one district."

The board did consider the Community Equity map, put forward at the last minute by a coalition that included the Lawyers' Committee, Mr. Pine said. Taking District 4 as an example -- a district that includes East Palo Alto, the Belle Haven neighborhood of Menlo Park and Redwood City -- Mr. Pine said a comparison showed only slight differences between this map and the one the board approved.

Using the board-approved map, the District 4 population is 35 percent white voters versus 34 percent for the Equity map. The total for Hispanic, African American and Asian residents is 61 percent for the board map versus 63 percent for Equity.

A similar breakdown shows up when comparing eligible voters in District 4, with 54 percent white for the board map versus 53 percent for Equity, and 42 percent Hispanic, African American and Asian with the board map versus 44 percent with Equity, Mr. Pine said.

While the differences from map to map did not exceed 2 percentage points, such differences are significant and do matter, Mr. Rubin said, referring to *Bush v. Gore* in the 2000 presidential election. By 2020, he added, the issue will be moot because of population growth, "but it doesn't excuse the actions of the board, which I believe were irresponsible and disrespectful of the communities they supposedly serve."

"We tried to keep cities whole," Supervisor Horsley said in an interview, adding, "All politics is essentially compromise." The number of registered minority voters is "distressingly low," he said. "I think that we need to do a better job of registering people to vote."