

## Bay Area News Group forum explores San Mateo County district elections

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Posted:

MercuryNews.com

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SAN MATEO -- Community leaders who took part in a Bay Area News Group-sponsored forum said San Mateo County's new system of district elections could have a powerful effect on the makeup of the Board of Supervisors.

The switch from an at-large system, in which supervisors were elected by voters countywide, came in response to a lawsuit alleging the old format diluted the voting power of minorities. Proponents hope district elections will empower minority communities and remove financial barriers to running for supervisor in a county of more than 739,000 people.

Supervisor Warren Slocum and former East Palo Alto Mayor Carlos Romero argued elections will be more competitive. Slocum said he already feels liberated by the change, which will be in place in time for the June primary, when Supervisors Don Horsley and Carole Groom will be up for re-election.

"It's really allowed me to focus my time and my energy on the Fourth District," said Slocum, whose constituents include the socioeconomically disadvantaged, Latino communities of North Fair Oaks and East Palo Alto, "because next time around that's where I'm running from, that's where I'll be elected or defeated."

The supervisor added it will be important for the county's Asian, Latino and black communities to increase voter registration and turnout to fully realize the potential of district elections.

The third panelist, East Palo Alto activist Tiombe Jamba, expressed pessimism that her city's dwindling black population would benefit from the new system, under which supervisors will be elected only by voters in their districts.

"I don't believe that black people can count on the electoral system," said Jamba, who is African-American. "I am not hopeful that there will be real change. I accept that this is a little better."

The Board of Supervisors chose new boundaries Tuesday for the county's five districts after hearing recommendations from a board-appointed committee. One member of the Thursday's audience at the San Mateo Main Library, 27-year-old Eli Kouichi Shirayanagi, criticized the county for allowing the board, and not a fully independent commission, to determine the map.

Slocum acknowledged the process wasn't perfect but suggested the supervisors were not motivated by self-interest. For instance, Slocum said his constituents in Menlo Park lobbied him to keep the city whole. In the end it was split, as were several other cities.

The board has had only two minority supervisors since 1955, even though minorities now comprise more than half the county's population. Romero said he doesn't know if the new format will boost the board's racial diversity in the short term. But ultimately it will happen, he

predicted, inspiring a new generation of political leaders.

"Those role models eventually will make a huge difference," Romero said.

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