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Sonoma City Council Approves Resolution Declaring Intent to Initiate Procedures to Transition to District-Based Elections

Sonoma, CA — On December 4, 2024, the Sonoma City Council approved a resolution to transition from at-large elections to district-based elections for City Council. The decision is a forward-thinking step taken by the Council to reduce potential legal risks. While the City has not faced any claims of vote dilution or discrimination under the California Voting Rights Act (CVRA), the Council chose this path to be proactive in safeguarding against future legal challenges. The vote was four (4) in favor, with one Councilmember absent.

“This is the fiscally responsible action to mitigate potential legal risks,” said Sonoma Mayor John Gurney. “While the California Voting Rights Act aims to address voting discrimination, there is no evidence of vote dilution or discrimination in Sonoma. This decision reflects our proactive approach to avoid the costs associated with legal challenges, not because of any concerns about the current election system. Council is aware that there may be concerns about how having a Councilmember represent a specific district could impact their ability to also represent the broader interests of the entire City. We will remain mindful of these concerns throughout the process, ensuring that all members continue to work toward the best interests of the City of Sonoma.”

Currently, the City of Sonoma (City) uses an at-large election system, where all registered voters elect Council Members regardless of district. However, many cities in California, including some in Sonoma County, have received letters from plaintiff attorney offices alleging that at-large systems violate the CVRA, claiming they dilute the voting power of specific communities. While the City has not received such a letter, the City has chosen to transition voluntarily to a district-based election system to mitigate the risk of litigation and the potential for costly legal battles.

This transition is part of a broader trend in California, where cities are adopting district-based elections in recent years, often in response to CVRA challenges. Cities that have made this transition have cited the following reasons:

- **California Voting Rights Act** - The CVRA aims to prevent at-large election systems from diluting the votes of minority groups. Cities can face lawsuits if their at-large system is deemed to hinder the ability of minority communities to elect candidates of their choice. Switching to district-based elections can mitigate the risk of costly legal challenges.
- **Improved Representation** - District-based elections can ensure that diverse neighborhoods and communities within a city have direct representation on the council. This can lead to more equitable decision-making that reflects the needs and priorities of all residents.

- **Cost-Effectiveness** - At-large systems often lead to citywide campaigns that are expensive, making it difficult for candidates with fewer resources to compete. District based elections can reduce campaign costs, encouraging more grassroots participation.
- **Avoiding Litigation** - Many cities have switched to district-based elections after facing CVRA demand letters or lawsuits, often settling for significant sums. Transitioning proactively can save money and demonstrate a commitment to fair representation.

As part of this transition, the City is committed to an open and inclusive process. Public input will be actively encouraged throughout, with five meetings dedicated to soliciting feedback. The first of these meetings will be a special session on December 18, 2024, at 5:00 PM in the Sonoma City Council Chambers, the public is encouraged to attend.

The tentative timeline for this transition is outlined in the adopted resolution and on the Transition to District Elections webpage (www.sonomacity.org/transition-to-district-based-elections), and includes several public hearings. A professional demographer will assist the City in drafting the district maps, guiding both the public and the City Council through the process. Public hearings will take place in 2025, with final adoption scheduled for March.

A recording of the meeting can be viewed on the City's YouTube Channel at: youtu.be/G-djSpeF2t0?si=JF34uqgl3plKbxsu. For more information, including details on the public meetings, how to get involved, and to sign up for email updates, visit the Transition to District Elections webpage at: www.sonomacity.org/transition-to-district-based-elections.

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