

PRESS RELEASE

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Pomona Unified Discusses Possible Shift from At-Large to Trustee-Area Elections

POMONA – The Pomona Unified School District Board of Education discussed a potential shift from at-large to trustee-area elections during a special meeting on Jan. 28.

In recent years, many school districts have moved to trustee-area elections in response to federal, state and voter rights laws designed to ensure underrepresented groups have equal opportunities and access to voting and representation.

The meeting provided board members with an overview of the voting history in Pomona Unified and served as a forum for community members to provide feedback on the topic. Community-wide forums on the potential shift will follow to ensure all voices are heard.

“When you view Pomona Unified’s election history, our community has consistently selected board members that reflect the makeup, values and priorities of our community,” said PUSD Superintendent Richard Martinez. “However, we are presenting our board members with this information for consideration as we evaluate the legal trends and possible ramifications in sustaining at-large elections.”

The board is expected to come to a decision during the 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 11 board meeting.

With at-large elections, registered voters are able to vote for any board member candidate on the ballot regardless of where in the PUSD District boundaries they reside. Trustee-area voting requires voters to cast a ballot for only the board member residing in their voter district, which is typically based on geography.

Pomona Unified’s voting track record is strong, but in some districts groups are using the courts to raise issues, leaving school districts vulnerable to lawsuits, litigation fees and special elections, according to District Legal Counsel Kasey Haws.

“Litigation regarding the California Voting Rights Act is sweeping municipalities and school districts across the state,” Haws stated. “To avoid this costly process, stay ahead of any potential court action and preserve the District’s ability to determine the outcome, we are taking the prudent step to discuss what viable options are available.”

At-large voting requires every board member to campaign to and be responsive to all constituents in the school district, offers an opportunity to run for a board seat every two years and board members consider the district as a whole.

In trustee-area elections, it is less expensive to run for office, campaigning is less intensive because candidates have a smaller voter base and board members typically focus more specifically on the needs of schools and neighborhoods in their specific district. Candidates would be eligible to run once every four years.

Trustee-area elections provide for more diversity on a board. However, the Pomona Unified community has traditionally voted in a diverse board of representatives.

The District has two options.

Option 1: The District can oppose trustee areas through a resolution, which would result in holding a series of public hearings and presenting supporting evidence against the move to a county committee. The committee would have the option of setting the matter for a public vote, hiring its own demographer to draw boundaries and requiring a special election in early 2016.

Option 2: Board members could pass a resolution agreeing to move to trustee area voting and seek a waiver of an election from the California Department of Education. The District would then hire a demographer to draw several possible trustee maps for public discussion, hold multiple hearings, vote for a final map and present the plan to the committee for final approval. A likely result is that two areas would be up for vote in 2015 and three in 2017.

“At this point, we are just discussing this issue and weighing our options,” said Board President Andrew Wong. “Our goal was to hear what the public had to say on this issue and take a hard look at what will be in the best interests of Pomona Unified and our community.”

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