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Three More Sunnyvale Residents Join Voting Rights Challenge to City Council Election System

Challenge asserts at-large election system disenfranchises Asian American voters and violates California Voting Rights Act

Sunnyvale, CA - Today three additional Sunnyvale residents joined an ongoing voting rights challenge that alleges the City of Sunnyvale's City Council election system disenfranchises Asian American voters.

On October 2, 2018, Sunnyvale resident Samir Kalra sent a letter to the City of Sunnyvale warning that the City's "at-large" numbered post method of electing its City Council, in which members of the seven-seat City Council can live anywhere in the city and are elected to represent the entire city, combined with the existence of racially polarized voting, impedes Asian Americans voters from electing candidates of their choice in violation of the California Voting Rights Act ("CVRA").

Kalra, who is a managing director of the Hindu American Foundation, is now joined by Sunnyvale residents Galen Kim Davis, a Korean American voice in the Sunnyvale community on this issue and active parent in youth sports; Kathy Higuchi, a long-time resident and Japanese American civil rights advocate; and Bowman Ching, a long-time resident and Chinese American civil rights advocate.

All four are represented by civil rights nonprofit organizations Asian Law Alliance and Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus, as well as a civil rights law firm Goldstein, Borgen, Dardarian & Ho. They and their counsel have made clear that that the City must transition to district elections in time for the November 2020 election to prevent any further dilution of Asian American votes.

"I'm joining this critical effort to ensure that Asian American voters are not excluded in upcoming elections," said Galen Kim Davis. "I don't want to see Sunnyvale dragging its feet when it comes to something as important as fair representation for all of Sunnyvale's residents."

Asians and Asian Americans are approximately 45% of the City's total population – the largest racial/ethnic group in the City – and about 33% of the City's eligible voters. Yet six of the seven current City Councilmembers are white and only three Asian American candidates have ever been elected to the Council.

The City Council is non-representative in other ways as well. Latinos are 18% of the City's total population and about 14% of the City's eligible voters, but the City Council has not had a Latino member in over 30 years. All seven City Councilmembers live south of El Camino Real or just a few blocks north, meaning that the northern half of the City -- which includes most of the City's

middle- and low-income communities, the core of the City's Latino community, and several of the largest mobile home parks in the state -- is home to zero City Councilmembers.

"We deserve a city council that reflects the full richness of our city," said Samir Kalra. "I'm thrilled that our group is expanding, and doing so in a way that shows the diversity of the Asian American community."

In a district election system, the City would be drawn into seven districts and each district would elect one city councilmember who lives within the district's boundaries to represent it on the Council. In so doing, a district election system would ensure that each part of Sunnyvale would have representation. A district system would also mean candidates only have to campaign in their district, one-seventh of the City, lowering barriers to running and reducing the burden to fundraise campaign cash in large amounts.

"Candidates with no connection to political insiders or special interests, and no personal wealth, would be more likely to run effective campaigns in a district-based election system," said Richard Konda, Executive Director of Asian Law Alliance.

"The Bay Area is proud of its diversity, but we have to take action to make sure our local democratic systems actually reflect that diversity. Everyone should have their voice heard," said Jonathan Stein, Voting Rights Program Manager & Staff Attorney at Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Asian Law Caucus.

"Though the Sunnyvale City Council has taken initial steps towards abandoning its at-large election system, we want to see the City adopt district elections in time for the next Council election in November 2020 to stop the dilutive effect of at-large elections and to begin empowering more segments of the Sunnyvale community," said Ginger Grimes, attorney at Goldstein, Borgen, Dardarian & Ho.

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