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Irvine explores adding 2 councilmembers, moving to by-district elections

Districting and expansion of the council could be on the ballot as early as 2024.



Homes in the Great Park neighborhood in Irvine, CA, on Wednesday, January 26, 2022. Irvine’s City Council voted 4-1 to look into redistricting and to form a committee to oversee it.(Photo by Jeff Gritchen, Orange County Register/SCNG)

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In one of its first moves of the year, the Irvine City Council is exploring adding more members and changing how they're elected.

[Irvine](#) is California's largest municipality with only a five-person council that uses citywide elections, rather than by-district contests, to elect councilmembers, according to city officials.

Councilmembers are considering changing the number of people who sit on the dais from four plus the mayor to six plus the mayor.

The council is also looking at switching from at-large to by-district elections, where [voters](#) would choose only one council member who lives within their area; now, all Irvine voters decide on all five seats.

Mayor Farrah Khan expects districting and expansion to be on the ballot by 2024. Districting, she said, will make it easier for people to run for office.

"In districts, you have a certain amount of population that you are reaching out to so it makes it a little easier," Khan told the Register. "You are able to walk those districts much more. We are able to have communication with the district members more. And it definitely reduces the cost of campaigning."

But Councilmember Tammy Kim said she worries marginalized communities will not be represented by their elected officials if the city changes to by-district elections. Since Irvine is a newer city, she said, it does not have the historical redlining that has occurred in other areas, referring to racial discrimination in housing. Therefore, ethnic enclaves do not exist within Irvine, Kim said.

"The only way in which a Latino candidate will have an opportunity is through the at-large system, where they are able to coalesce," Kim said. "My goal is to ensure that our communities can coalesce to provide the representation that they need and want."

As for the next steps, Irvine will issue a request for a proposal for a demographer, an independent source to draw maps ensuring population equality, geographic continuity, preservation of communities of interest and no favoritism to one political party. Irvine will also hold public hearings for input on the maps drawn.

Kim will serve on a working group with Councilmembers Mike Carroll and Larry Agran to oversee districting.

"I have to for the underrepresented — historically underrepresented — I have to be on there," Kim said. "I have to make sure that lines are not gerrymandered."

Now, the ratio of residents to councilmembers is 62,050 to 1, according to city data, but if the city ups the number of councilmembers, it will be 44,321 to 1.

In the last decade, other cities in Orange County [have switched to district elections](#), including Anaheim, Fullerton, Garden Grove, Santa Ana, Tustin, Westminster, Los Alamitos and Las Palma — in part because of the threat of legal action by Malibu-based lawyer Kevin Shenkman. Shenkman filed a lawsuit last year against Cypress when councilmembers voted behind closed doors to stick with at-large elections.

Shenkman [threatened to sue Irvine in 2021](#) if it did not switch to district elections. Even though the council voted 3-2 to stick with at-large elections in a meeting last year, [the lawsuit did not materialize](#).

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