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Irvine council narrows maps for district elections, decision could be made next month

City leaders chose three maps at a public hearing this week and tasked the city demographer with drawing a map that incorporates their best qualities.

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Maps creating concentrations of voters of Asian descent garnered a lot of support this week as Irvine leaders look at how to carve up the city to create new council districts.

The council is narrowing down the options for boundary maps as it considers the transition from having all voters choose council race winners to by-district elections, where voters would choose only the councilmember representing their geographic area. The council picked three maps to move forward, though a majority of public commenters and two councilmembers voiced support for one in particular that has high Asian representation in more than two districts.



“When I look at the citizen voting age population, the Asian community is fairly well-represented in three districts, above 40%” Councilmember Kathleen Treseder said of Map 148. “I’m a bit worried about maps where there’s only two that are fairly high because I think that constrains representation to a maximum of two seats.”

The council has tasked the city demographer with taking the three maps and drawing a compromise version that incorporates the best qualities of each to be presented for a public hearing on Oct. 10, when the council is expected to select a final division of district boundaries to present when putting before voters the question of changing to district elections.

After previous councils resisted pressure — and the threat of a lawsuit — to make the switch to by-district elections, current councilmembers [decided in January to look at the election process further.](#)

If the new voting system is approved by Irvine voters in March, the size of the City Council would increase from five to seven members, with only the mayor elected at-large.

The new system would then go into effect in November 2024. Current council terms would not be affected by the change. Because Irvine councilmembers are elected to four-year terms and were not all elected at the same time, only some districts would be on the November ballot.

“Over the next two election cycles, the council would be transitioning from at-large to district elections,” said National Demographic Corporation’s Justin Levitt, who is serving as Irvine’s demographer.

In July, the [council selected six maps to be considered](#) and also requested the city demographer generate new maps based on suggested revisions. Since that hearing, Irvine has received 16 new maps, 13 coming from members of the community.

For maps to be compliant with federal and state requirements, they have to be population-balanced, have easily identifiable boundaries, no racial gerrymandering and cannot favor or discriminate against a political party. They also need to avoid dividing neighborhoods and communities of interest.

“Law says socioeconomic and geographic areas should be kept together for the purpose of their fair and effective representation,” Levitt said.

During this week's hearing, Map 148, one of the maps generated by the National Demographic Corporation based on suggested revisions from the July meeting, emerged as a clear favorite among community members as well as councilmembers Treseder and Tammy Kim.

Doug Elliott, an Irvine resident who [originally supported another map](#), threw his support behind Map 148 for similar reasons as Treseder mentioned — that it would facilitate equal representation by providing three districts with demographics favorable to Asian candidates. According to the latest U.S. Census, Irvine's largest population segments are 42.9% Asian, 37.4% White and 11.9% Hispanic or Latino – Middle Easterners and North Africans, including Lebanese, Egyptians and Persians, are categorized as White.

Elliott, who lives in the northern part of Irvine in one of the neighborhoods served by the Tustin Unified School District, also said he believes it's important to keep communities under that school district together, which Map 148 does.

Map 148 divides three of Irvine's planned villages, while another that had been favored divides five.

Kim, who has been the [sole voice of dissent on the dais](#) about changing how the council is elected, said Map 148 is the only map she'll be supporting because it "does the best possible job to ensure that we're minimizing any type of marginalization and any possible disenfranchisement."

"We are putting similar communities together — Northwood, Cypress Village and Woodbury — whereas the other maps have Woodbury and Cypress Village with Great Park," she added.

A representative from UC Irvine asked that the university maintain a district with the University Town Center and the Park West, Toscana and Villa Siena apartment homes and separate from Turtle Rock, Turtle Ridge and Shady Canyon. He said the university seeks to maintain its largely student-populated areas in a common district that is separate from neighborhoods that are socioeconomically dissimilar and have conflicting interests.

One Woodbury resident voiced support for Map 148 because it wouldn't lump her neighborhood in with the Great Park. She said Woodbury residents have often been neglected when they complained about noise issues with the Great Park's development and do not feel connected to the Great Park community.

In the last decade, several cities – and school and special districts – in Orange County [have switched to district elections](#), including Anaheim, Fullerton, Garden Grove, Tustin, Westminster, Los Alamitos and La Palma — in part because of the threat of legal action based on the challenge that citywide voting marginalizes minority communities. Another round of cities have recently faced challenges to their at-large voting and are looking to also transition to district-based elections, including [Laguna Niguel](#) and [San Clemente](#).

As for the next steps, Irvine will hold two final workshops on Sept. 23, with the first at 10 a.m. at the Great Park Artist Studio and the last at 2 p.m. in the City Council Chamber.

Residents have until Sept. 29 to edit or update one of the three maps selected by the City Council or submit new ones. A final map is set to be selected on Oct. 10.

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2023 > September > 15