

Demographics may alter LTUSD board elections

By Kathryn Reed

Lake Tahoe Unified School District may have to change how it elects board members because of the growing student Hispanic population – which is 41 percent.



The California Voting Rights Act that was enacted in 2002 was implemented to make it easier for racial and ethnic groups to challenge at-large elections instead of contending with the federal Voting Rights Act. The theory is this gives people in all sections of a community a voice.

The irony is that even though LTUSD, like the majority of districts in California, has at-large elections, the five members already geographically represent the district. One lives in the Tahoe Keys, one in Meyers, one in Sierra Tract, one in Al Tahoe and one near Bijou.

They are, though, all white. Three are women and two are men.

The South Shore district is waiting for March when the Census figures come out to know what the overall demographics are of the South Shore compared to the district.

LTUSD has 3,878 students. Whites make up 49 percent of the population, Hispanics 41 percent, and blacks 1.2 percent.

Ultimately, it would be up to the voters to decide which type of representation they want. That could be on a ballot as soon as November, with the decision affecting a school board election two years later.

The legal brouhaha that has ensued since the state Voting Act

was put into place has cost at least one district millions of dollars to fight it. Now a cottage industry has cropped up to assess whether districts need to change how board members are elected.

It can cost upward of \$30,000 to sort through the legal mess, not to mention the multitude of meetings involving the county office of education and public.

When Superintendent Jim Tarwater was asked why not skip the consultant telling the district what to do and go to the voters in November, he said the process doesn't allow that kind of logic to be used.

Tarwater has not been given a magic number from the Census that will trigger a review of the district's elections.

Other stats given out at the Jan. 11 meeting include: Males outnumber females by two percentage points at 51 percent.

English learners – those whose first language is something other than English – account for 28 of the students.

The Hispanic population at Bijou is 76 percent, Mount Tallac 50 percent, Sierra House 46 percent, South Tahoe Middle School 41 percent, Tahoe Valley 37 percent, South Tahoe High 32 percent, Environmental Magnet 8 percent.

A figure stated at the Jan. 11 school board meeting that startled the board is the realization 59 percent of the students qualify for a free or reduced lunch. That is up from 45 percent a year ago.

"It reflects the economic times," Tarwater told the board.

The board momentarily discussed how if the proposed cuts by the state to social service programs are enacted, it will create more of an economic crisis for families in the district.

In other action:

- Board member Larry Green said the tutoring program between Lake Tahoe Community College, where he works, and LTUSD has been reinstated.
- CFO Deb Yates will make a formal presentation to the board Jan. 25 about the budget and what might be in store based on Gov. Jerry Brown's proposals.