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As Anaheim City Council Set to Change Election System, Groups Protest Outside City Hall

One year after protests over police shootings turned violent in Anaheim, community activists and residents will rally to demand democratic change in the form of true district elections.

Anaheim - A group of Anaheim residents and activists will rally outside the gates of city hall on Tuesday, calling for real district elections as the Anaheim City council moves forward on its plan to enact a modified at-large voting system. Protestors will reissue their demand that the city allow voters to decide on district elections, a system they say would engender greater participation from groups that have been invisible in the political process and underserved by the city. The rally comes nearly a year after the city was rocked by riots in the aftermath of police shootings of two unarmed Hispanic men in Anaheim.

Earlier this month, the Anaheim city council voted three to two in favor of the modified at-large plan, which requires that council members live in districts that will be drawn up by the council. However, council members would still be elected by residents city-wide, not from the districts they represent.

Critics say the change falls far short of the political reform that is badly needed in Anaheim and is inconsistent with the recommendation of the citizen's advisory committee that spent months studying the issue. The LA Times called the move "contempt for the principle of representative government" in an editorial.

Opponents of the at-large system say it exists to serve only the city's powerful elite. At-large races are a detriment to democracy, critics say, partly because of the cost of running a city-wide campaign.

Protesters believe district elections will create a more equitable, accountable system. "Districts would give residents true representation in their community, as the elected official would know what's going on in their neighborhood," said advisory committee member Vivian Pham.

But for now, the status quo remains. In July of last year, outrage over the police shootings of two unarmed Hispanic men brought to light vast inequities between the city's elite and it's poorer residents who are underserved.

"Nothing of substance has changed in the city," said Eric Altman, the Executive Director of Orange County Communities Organized for Responsible Development, one of the groups organizing the protest. "There is dramatic inequality; the poorer neighborhoods get fewer resources. And there has been no substantive change in how the police are held accountable."

In June of last year Anaheim was sued by the ACLU for a violation of the California Voting rights act over it's electoral system. That lawsuit is still working its way through the courts, and it is unclear whether the new reform will satisfy the claimant's charge.

In response to the ACLU lawsuit, the city responded by forming a Citizens Advisory Committee to explore alternatives to the current at-large voting system in Anaheim. After months of meetings in venues across the city, the committee recommended that the Council give Anaheim residents the opportunity to decide their political future, in the form of a ballot initiative on district elections. The council ignored the committee's recommendation.