

San Rafael to launch 90-day public review on district elections



San Rafael Mayor Gary Phillips said the city is beginning the process to shift to district elections.
Robert Tong — Marin Independent Journal

By [Keri Brenner](#), Marin Independent Journal 02/03/18

With the clock ticking, San Rafael is inviting the public this month to attend the first two of a 90-day series of events designed to make over the city's election process.

Starting at 6 p.m. Monday and continuing an hour before the regular City Council meeting on Feb. 26, the city will offer public discussion sessions with a newly hired demographer to talk about drawing four new city council districts.

"We have 90 days to do quite a bit," said Mayor Gary Phillips, whose seat will still remain an at-large elected post even after the switch. "We have two public meetings first — both to be held before the regular City Council meetings — so that the demographer can get a sense of the city."

As per the City Council's [unanimous vote Jan. 16](#), council members will be elected starting in 2020 from voters in the new four districts — as opposed to the current elections method of voting for those officials citywide.

After the first two meetings, the city will conduct three more public meetings and hearings to discuss the draft district maps. A final hearing and vote on the four district maps will take place around mid-April, or 90 days from the Jan. 16 vote. With San Rafael's population at almost 60,000, the districts are likely to include about 15,000 people each.

"We want to get the word out," said City Manager Jim Schutz in an email, in regard to publicizing the 90-day process. Schutz said the city has created a web page at cityofsanrafael.org.

The webpage can be translated to any language through Google Translate," Schutz added. "We have additionally had more complicated items — such as a [Powerpoint from \(outside counsel\) Chris Skinnell](#) — professionally translated into Spanish."

Skinnell's report on the legal process was presented Jan. 13 at a meeting of the Canal Alliance, Canal Welcome Center, Alcohol Justice, Youth for Justice and United Marin Rising.

"We are planning to organize another educational event to help people understand the current state of district elections," said Omar Carrera, executive director of the Canal Alliance, in an email Tuesday.

"I am waiting to hear back from the city about the adoption of an online tool to facilitate the mapping process," he added. "Once we have access to the online tool, we can educate the community and involve

them in the process.” Without the online tool, “it is almost impossible to draw maps that meet the technical criteria,” Carrera said.

In addition, Schutz said he would include information on the process in his twice-monthly newsletter, “Snapshot,” on the online blog NextDoor, and on social media such as Facebook and Twitter — in both English and Spanish.

The 90-day deadline is seen as a “safe harbor” period, during which time the city — as long as it makes progress toward the switch — could avoid being sued for what was identified by Santa Monica attorney Kevin Shenkman as potential violations of the California Voting Rights Act.

Shenkman, who has sent similar communications to other cities with at-large elections, said the district elections provide [more opportunity for diversity in leadership](#) by making the election process more accessible to “protected classes,” such as Latinos.

San Rafael has never had a [City Council member with a Latino surname](#), although the city has one of the largest Latino populations in Marin — much of that centered in the Canal area.

The city’s new webpage on district elections has links of history to explain some of the financial liabilities that other cities have incurred — such as Palmdale in Southern California — who challenged the alleged voting rights violations.