

# Latinos Sue Long Island Town Over Voting System

By ALAN FEUER

For Maria Hernandez, the chief problem in Brentwood, her Long Island hometown, has always been the streets and their state of disrepair.

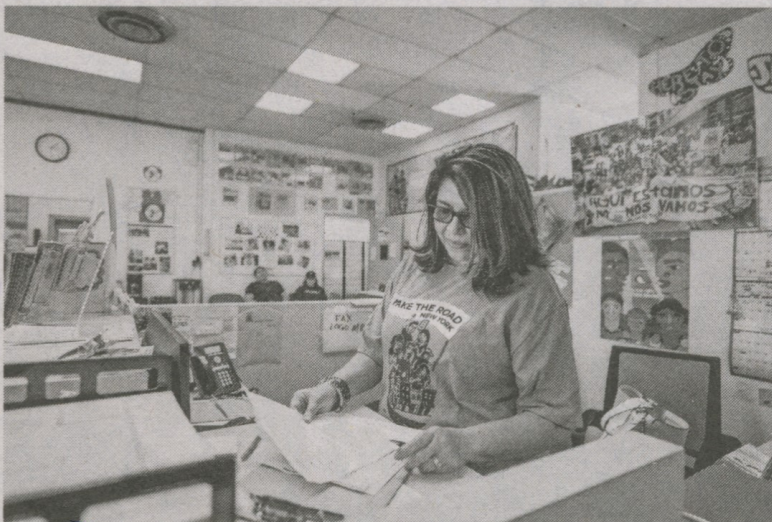
For Ana Flores, it was the time town officials dumped tons of construction debris into one of Brentwood's parks.

Others in the hamlet, which sits within the town of Islip, mentioned different troubles — traffic lights don't work, trash pickups are slow, schools are underfunded — but all of them, they say, have the same root cause: The way that Islip, a mostly white community, elects its local leaders has diluted the power of Latino residents, effectively robbing them of their vote.

"If you come to Brentwood, you would notice that our town looks very different from the other towns in this municipality," said Ms. Hernandez, 53, who moved to Brentwood from El Salvador nearly 20 years ago. "There's so much lack of interest from the town board that we feel like an island. We are like a ghost town."

On Monday, however, with the help of two community groups, Ms. Hernandez and three other Latino residents of Brentwood filed suit against the town, claiming that Islip's electoral system, in which candidates seek votes townwide instead of in specific districts, has deprived them of political representation. The lawsuit, filed in Federal District Court in Brooklyn, seeks to replace this so-called at-large system with a district system, a move that could give Latino candidates a better chance of being elected from largely Latino areas.

At the heart of the suit is the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, which lawyers in the 1990s used successfully to scrap discriminatory at-large systems in the nearby Long Island town of Hempstead and in New Rochelle in Westchester County. In 2006,



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Maria Hernandez, above, and Ana Flores, left, both of Brentwood, on Long Island, are among a group of residents suing the town of Islip.

community have been demoted to second-class citizens," it claims.

Islip, which sits in Suffolk County between the Long Island Expressway and the Great South Bay, encompasses four incorporated villages and more than 20 unincorporated hamlets — among them, Brentwood, Central Islip and North Bay Shore, which are predominantly Latino. But even though Latinos make up about a third of Islip's population, a Latino resident has never been elected to its five-person town board.

According to the lawsuit, this has led to a persistent neglect of Islip's Latino areas. Potholes go unfixed, it says, and all of Islip's five brownfield sites — land that has been environmentally contaminated and often abandoned as a result — are in or near Brentwood. When Latino residents of the town call their local fire and police departments, the suit contends, "they are often met with hostile and unresponsive officials who ignore or mistreat them."

the federal government sued the village of Port Chester, N.Y., on similar grounds, and a judge eventually ruled that the village's at-large system affected the "rights of Hispanics to participate in the political process."

In Islip, the new suit contends, at-large voting "has for many years systematically prevented members of the town's minority Latino community from electing any candidates of their choice to the Islip Town Board, thus denying the members of that community their most basic rights.

"Members of the town's Latino

In 2005, the lawsuit notes, Islip initially refused to allow a Central American parade to be held on its streets and agreed to do so only after being sued. In 2013, the town closed the only local pool that was easily accessible to its Latino residents. The following year, the suit maintains, companies with "political connections" to town officials dumped nearly 40,000 tons of debris containing asbestos and pesticides into Roberto Clemente Park, which primarily served the Latino community.

"One of the critical things about this case is where we are in our country's history," said Frederick K. Brewington, a lawyer for the Islip plaintiffs, who also brought the suit against Hempstead in 1996. "This lawsuit is important to a growing population that has been tossed and tattered by government officials. It serves as an opportunity for the community to speak loudly into the microphone and utilize laws put there for that very purpose."

A spokeswoman for the town of Islip said officials had not yet seen the lawsuit and had declined to comment on it.

The accusations against Islip comes as voting rights have re-emerged as a powerful issue across the country. This month, the United States Supreme Court upheld Ohio's aggressive efforts to kick people off its voting rolls if they skip a few elections and fail to respond to a notice from election officials. Some states, including Florida and Louisiana, are now involved in court fights seeking to restore the vote to felons.

For Ms. Flores, 21, who recently graduated from Stony Brook University, joining the Islip lawsuit has provided her with a chance to finally exercise a power she feels has been denied to her.

"I wanted to do something," she said. "I realized that we can do something about the things in our own government that we don't like. We have a voice."