

Opening Arguments Begin in Suit Brought By Hispanic Residents



Opening arguments began Wednesday in Central Islip federal court in a lawsuit brought by Latino residents of Islip Town who say the town's system of electing leaders discriminates against them.

Brentwood residents and a pair of advocacy groups are asking the court to throw out Islip's at-large system of electing town council members, arguing that it violates the federal Voting Rights Act by preventing Hispanics from receiving adequate representation on the five-member town board. They want the town to adopt council districts that they believe would improve the chances of Latinos winning elections to represent the communities in which they live.

In opening arguments — held virtually with some participants taking part via video or audio feeds — Hempstead attorney Frederick K. Brewington argued that Islip Latinos have suffered "decades of discrimination" and the town's white Republican officials "have no shared identity with the Latino community."

"The reality is that race permeates every aspect of life in Islip, including party affiliation, and as a result, Latinos in Islip have no say in the governance of their own town," Brewington said.

"Latinos in Islip truly have no path to gaining seats on the town board."

The bench trial is being heard by U.S. District Court Judge Gary R. Brown.

A lawyer for the town, Louis Fisher of Washington, D.C., countered that Islip Latinos are an "American success story" who earn more income than Latinos in other parts of the country. He

said the lawsuit is an attempt by Democrats to improve their chances of winning elections because they have been largely unsuccessful at the ballot box.

"There is nothing here to suggest that radical change is required or would do anything at all," Fisher said, adding that recent elections won by Republican candidates "just means that Democrats always lose," adding that Democratic candidates in Islip have lost recent elections by about the same margins regardless of their race or ethnicity.

Latinos make up about a third of Islip's population of 335,000, but there are no Hispanic representatives on the town board or in other elected positions. Islip has had only one elected person of color: Republican Town Clerk Joan Johnson, a Black woman who served from 1991 to 2007.

Lack of representation contributes to disparities in household income, education, crime and health care, and may have been a factor in illegal dumping discovered in 2014 at Roberto Clemente Park in Brentwood, a predominantly Latino neighborhood, the plaintiffs have said. Brewington said Islip's Latino communities, primarily Central Islip and Brentwood, were "ground zero" in Long Island's coronavirus health crisis.

Jorge Guadron of Central Islip, an El Salvador native and U.S. citizen who twice has run unsuccessfully as a Democrat for town offices, testified that despite enthusiastic support for his campaign from Latino voters, he received no funding from his own party.

"They saw that the chances I had were very slim, so they chose not to put up any money at all because it was fruitless," said Guadron, a marketing business owner.

Testimony was to resume Thursday morning.