

## **‘Someone Who Looks Like Us:’ Islip Latinos, Their Advocates Hail deal in Voting Rights Case**

Latino residents of Islip Town and their supporters on Wednesday hailed a settlement of a federal lawsuit that will abolish the town’s at-large council system and replace it with one designed to ensure Hispanics are represented on the town board.

As part of the settlement, Islip will start creating four council districts next year, with each represented by its own town board member. One district will be crafted to represent northwest Islip communities such as Brentwood, North Bay Shore and Central Islip, where most of the town’s 113,000 Hispanics live.

The agreement, announced last week and approved Wednesday by U.S. District Court Judge Gary R. Brown in Central Islip, will make Islip the fourth Long Island town in recent years to get rid of its at-large council system, which critics say leaves large swaths of residents, including minorities, underrepresented in municipal affairs.

Islip’s Hispanic residents for decades have said town officials ignored their complaints on issues from crime to potholes. The agreement, they said, promises to give them a seat at the political table.



Maria Magdalena Hernandez is one of four Brentwood residents who sued Islip Town over its at-large district system, which she says resulted in Latinos being "treated as second-class citizens." Portrait of Maria Magdalena Hernandez, one of four Brentwood residents who sued the town over its at-large council election system. Photographed outside of the office of Make The Road NY in Brentwood on the afternoon of Oct. 13, 2020 Credit: Newsday/Thomas A. Ferrara.

"I am so excited that we will now finally have representation for our Brentwood community," Maria Magdalena Hernandez, one of four Brentwood residents who sued the town, said in a statement. "For decades, we have not had someone on the town board fighting for our rights and needs. We were treated as second-class citizens. ... Now, we will be able to elect a candidate of our choice looking out for our community."

Islip Supervisor Angie Carpenter said reaching the settlement was "difficult," noting that the town last year had successfully blocked an attempt by the plaintiffs to stop town elections until the issue was resolved.

"The town board will continue its unwavering commitment to represent and be accountable to all our residents in the Town of Islip, as the transition is made to councilmanic districts," she said in a statement. "Careful consideration was given to all the options, and when weighed against the escalating costs and inherent

uncertainty of litigation, we believe that a settlement is the best and most responsible action which protects all interests, most especially our taxpayers, particularly in light of the current fiscal crisis brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic."

Hispanics make up about one-third of Islip's population of 334,000, but Hispanic candidates have failed to win seats on the town board.

Only one person of color, Republican Town Clerk Joan Johnson, who served from 1991 to 2007, has held an elected Islip Town post.

Districts will be created next year

The settlement, known as a consent decree, had been tentatively announced Friday after seven days of testimony in a nonjury trial before Brown. Terms were not immediately disclosed at that time while Brown took several days to review them.

The settlement outlines a plan to create the new districts next year. Elections for the first two districts — including District 1, the area including Latino neighborhoods centered in Brentwood — will be held next year.

Elections for the other two districts will be held in 2023.

Islip will join Hempstead, Brookhaven and North Hempstead towns in adopting council districts. Long Island's nine other towns have at-large councils.

The case, Flores v. Town of Islip, was filed in 2018 by residents and advocates who charged that the at-large system violated the federal Voting Rights Act by discriminating against Hispanic residents.

Latino residents have long charged that at-large council voting in Islip effectively made it impossible for them to win seats on the board, resulting in disparities in household income, education, health care and police protection.

Before the agreement was reached, witnesses called by Hempstead lawyer Frederick K. Brewington, who represents the plaintiffs, had testified that most of Islip's population lay in the town's affluent, majority white South Shore communities from Bayport to Brightwaters. The at-large system combined with those demographics presented impossibly steep hurdles for Latinos seeking town board seats, they testified.

Ana Flores, who with her father, Rene, was among the plaintiffs, said she was "more than proud of my community for fighting to make this happen. Our community will finally have representation in our town; someone who looks like us and knows what it is like to be a Latino in Islip."