

LONG ISLAND / SUFFOLK

Latinos, Dems 'at long last' could win seat in Islip, experts say



Maria Magdalena Hernandez was one of four Brentwood residents who sued Islip Town over its election system. Credit: Newsday/Thomas A. Ferrara

By Carl MacGowan

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The landmark settlement this month of a lawsuit alleging that Islip Town elections discriminated against Hispanics could prove to be a political boon for Latinos and Democrats, who have struggled for decades to win at the town ballot box, local officials and political experts say.

The settlement, reached about a week into a trial held virtually in federal court in Central Islip, calls for abolishing Islip's at-large council election system. In its place, next year Islip will create four council districts — including one majority Hispanic district centered in Brentwood.

Democrats — who haven't won an Islip town election since one-term Supervisor Phil Nolan lost a 2011 reelection bid — see the deal as providing their best chance in years to win one or more town board seats.

Hispanics — who make up about 31% of Islip's total population of 330,000, but have failed to win a town election in at least 40 years — celebrated the agreement as a victory that will finally give them a voice in town politics.

The 2018 lawsuit, filed by four Brentwood residents and two advocacy groups, said at-large voting violated the federal Voting Rights Act by making it nearly impossible for Hispanics to win elections.

"At long last, democracy in town government," said Assemb. Phil Ramos (D-Brentwood), whose district includes large Hispanic communities in Brentwood and Central Islip. "This is a historic milestone that empowers a community of color that has been neglected for years."

Switching to council districts — which exist in only three other Long Island towns, Hempstead, North Hempstead and Brookhaven — represents a seismic shift in Islip, where residents and Republican town leaders have fought the idea for decades. Town residents voting in a 2006 referendum rejected council districts, leaving at-large elections in place until now.

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Critics of council districts said they grant too much power to one district — the one in which the town supervisor lives. Supporters of at-large systems said residents get to vote for all town council members, instead of just the one from their district.

But Brentwood residents have said they are left out of town government because board members who live north of Sunrise Highway are rare. Islip Supervisor Angie Carpenter and the town's four current council members, all Republicans, live in mostly white South Shore communities.

Frederick K. Brewington, the Hempstead lawyer who represented those who sued the town, said the agreement "is an enormous step forward" for Islip Latinos.

"I think it speaks volumes for the communities of color on Long Island, in particular, that there is strength in numbers that can lead to opportunities for having a voice in local government," said Brewington, who also led a successful 2000 lawsuit to abolish at-large voting in Hempstead Town. "Clearly, because of the actual population in Islip, Latinos should and will have a strong voice not only in District 1 but in other parts of the town."

The settlement is designed to ensure Latinos are the majority in at least one district — District 1, concentrated in Brentwood, North Bay Shore and part of Central Islip.

Districts will be created next year in time for town elections, when seats representing District 1 and District 2 — which will cover most of Central Islip and communities from Hauppauge to West Sayville — will be contested.

Sayville political consultant Michael Dawidziak, who works mostly for Republicans, said there is little doubt the settlement practically guarantees Democrats will win a town board seat next year after being mostly sidelined in town government.

"It's going to change the dynamic," Dawidziak said. "Even though you may not get the majority or be able to control votes and things like that, you still get the bully pulpit."

Suffolk Republican chairman Jesse Garcia, one of the county GOP's highest-ranking Hispanics, said his party would not concede defeat in the Brentwood district and expects to run competitive candidates there.

"I know the supervisor and the town board there are diligent and compassionate toward and committed to working with all the people in the Town of Islip," Garcia said. "That's not going to change one way or another with council districts."

Districts will bring changes

It was not immediately clear what impact districts will have on the board's four incumbent council members. The four-year terms of Trish Bergin of East Islip and James P. O'Connor of Great River are set to expire next year. Bergin is in the last of the three terms she is allowed under Islip's term limits law. O'Connor, who is in his first term, appears to be eligible to run for the District 2 seat.

Seats held by Mary Kate Mullen of Bayport and John Cochrane of Brightwaters are up for election in 2023.

LIU Post political science professor Jeremy Buchman said while the settlement may not give Latinos or Democrats a board majority, it represents progress for "residents who have felt left out."

"You could think of it as symbolic, but I think it's more than that," Buchman said. "I think there is a difference between getting heard and not having the votes versus not getting heard in the first place."

The settlement requires district borders to be redrawn in 2023 based on 2020 census data. Elections will be held later in 2023 for districts 3 and 4.

The long-term impact of the settlement may depend on future demographic shifts and how they affect redistricting, said Lawrence Levy, executive dean of the National Center for Suburban Studies at Hofstra University.

"That's the big question moving forward," Levy said. "How do you draw the [district] lines and who's going to draw them?"

For Islip's Hispanics, debates over the town's politics are less important than feeling like they finally belong.

Maria Magdalena Hernandez, 56, one of the Brentwood residents who launched the lawsuit, said the new political landscape gives her hope that her neighborhood will elect "a person that will be able to share our values." The beneficiaries, she said, will be her three children and three grandchildren.

"It's a great victory," Hernandez said. "Down the line, they're the ones who are going to be able to live on and see the great changes that we'll bring."

POPULATION, BY THE NUMBERS

ISLIP TOWN

Total: 329,611

Hispanic or Latino: **101,259**

BRENTWOOD

Total: 61,930

Hispanic or Latino: **44,051**

NORTH BAY SHORE

Total: 21,045

Hispanic or Latino: **13,671**

CENTRAL ISLIP

Total: 31,846

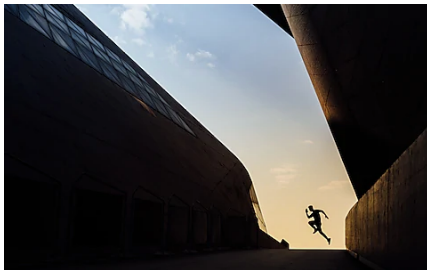
Hispanic / Latino: **14,616**

Source: 2018 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau

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Carl MacGowan is a Long Island native who covers Brookhaven Town after having previously covered Smithtown, Suffolk County courts and numerous spot news and feature stories over his 20-plus year career at Newsday.



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