

Better LGBT Representation for Ventura County
By Matthew Craffey

In 2010, a new United States census will be conducted. In 2011, that data will be reviewed to determine how best to redraw the districts in a way that serves the different communities in Ventura County. In the past, Hispanic activists and others have been involved in this process, working to make the districts more representative for the interests they represent, but one group has never been represented in this process; the LGBT community. This project will look at the need for better LGBT representation in Ventura County, how that process might work, and who would be involved.

Background on the Ventura County Redistricting Task Force

A group of activists in the community of Ventura came together in January 2001 and formed the Ventura County Redistricting Task Force, or VCRTF. The goal was to take the data from the recently completed 2000 census, and use it to help better serve the needs and interests of the various communities in Ventura, particular those identified as “communities of interest”, that most of the activists felt were underrepresented in Ventura politics. “Communities of interest” could technically include any minority group that is at risk of being marginalized, but since the only minority group that represents a large part of the Ventura County population is Hispanics, “communities of interest” as part of the VCRTF came to mostly refer to the need to better represent the Hispanic community.

Karl Lawson, who is on the Advisory Community of Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy or CAUSE, had prior involvement in making sure hard to count populaces were counted. Because of this, he was chosen to head up the VCRTF. Mr. Lawson spoke with

Professor Gregory Freeland, Chair, Department of Political Science at California Lutheran University and President of the Board at CAUSE, on June 22nd, 2009.

While one of the goals of the VCRTF was for it to be a non-partisan committee dedicated to better representing all the different groups that live in Ventura, it appears that many, if not most involved had very clear, and specific intentions for what the VCRTF would accomplish. Mr. Lawson's duty was to serve as a mediator between the many and almost certainly different interests involved. It is important to note that the people on the task force were all volunteers. They were not paid for their time and efforts. Steve Cummings, from Supervisor Bennett's staff, was part of the process, as were various city mayors, and other supervisor staff members.

The activists involved with the VCRTF had various agenda's. One was to create a Latino dominated assembly district. The way they planned to do this was through establishing a likable Hispanic county supervisor that had broad appeal that could use his county supervisor position as a stepping stone to a state assembly seat. Representatives of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC) such as David Rodriguez and many other Latino activists were present at these meetings, and driving the agenda. LULAC is an organization that works to ensure political representation of Hispanic community throughout the U.S. In an interview with Professor Gregory Freeland on June 23rd, 2009, Mr. Rodriguez says he wanted the Hispanic population in Ventura County represented in District 5 and District 3. He felt the Supervisors in those districts were too conservative and wanted to boost Hispanic representation in District 3 particularly.

Rodriguez and others representing Hispanic interests thought they could get 2 Hispanic districts from redrawing the lines a certain way. Lawson knew that could not be done, and

could likely risk splitting the Hispanic populace so that they didn't get even one solidly represented district. He was concerned with what is known as "packing" and "cracking". "Packing" is putting a large amount of one ethnic or interest group into one district so they have a greater likelihood of getting at least one supervisor elected in the 5 districts that fully represents them. Unfortunately, they have little or no representation in the other 4 districts this way. "Cracking" is spreading that ethnic or interest group out among all 5 districts so that hopefully their interests will be represented in all districts. Unfortunately, this likely insures that no district will be solidly responsible to the needs of that community, since they won't make up a large enough percentage in any district to really have a voice. Lawson believes that the Hispanic vote prior to the VCRTF district redraw was "cracked" because they were split between three districts, and this suppressed any real Hispanic representation on the board.

Lawson was more interested in looking at better representing Latinos through the County Board of Supervisors and creating a better balance. He was concerned that Thousand Oaks controlled two districts, while Oxnard which has a larger total populace than T.O., only dominated one. There were four "safe seats", as Lawson describes them, and only one swing seat. District 1 was safe for a Ventura liberal (socially progressive, economically moderate), District 5, which was the working class district, and District 2 and 4 which were solidly dominated by wealthy Republicans. The only seat up for grabs was the oddly distributed 3rd District, which still leaned right politically due to the percentage of registered voters.

A major tool used in deciding how to best redraw the supervisor districts, was a computer program called Maptitude. Maptitude is Geographic Information System (GIS) software that provides a set of desktop mapping and spatial analysis functions, as well as,

nationwide geographic data sets of streets with addresses, census tracts, and census boundaries with over 600 demographic variables. It also, has race categories and geographic layers, like census blocks, voting districts, and school districts. The Census Bureau provides each state with census data, like race and voting age, broken down by census tracts and census blocks (Redistricting Information for 2001). Maptitude translates the Census Bureau Geographic file into a format that can create districts by aggregating smaller geographic layers, like blocks and precincts that result in newly created districts, as well as, display more than one geographic layer on the same map, so for example, blocks can be shown overlaid by voting districts (Gessesse, 2000). Maptitude's ability to query and display data on maps is one of its most prominent features, like thematic maps that can display Latino population percentages displayed by varying colors of blocks (Gessesse, 2000).

GIS has gained popularity and broad acceptance because it can calculate various factors related to "communities of interest" in its' redistricting databases. The VCRTF did take into consideration the growth rate in each area in order to ensure that the populations remain as roughly equal as possible until 2010. Maptitude will likely be utilized once again in evaluating data from the 2010 census.

Lawson believes the best achievement that came out of the VCRTF process was removing Thousand Oaks from District 3, and having it comprise Camarillo, Port Hueneme, South Oxnard, and Fillmore. This created a second working-class district that looked much more like District 5, than a district too fractured to serve anyone of the populaces needs. It also created a better balance of Liberal and Conservative representation on the county board. Before districts were redrawn, Kathy Long had to appeal to the Conservative Thousand Oaks

voters in order to win. Her elections were always very close because she had the support of her true base of working-class Santa Paula and Fillmore, and to a lesser extent, Camarillo voters, but struggled to convince Thousand Oaks and Conservative Camarillo voters that she was a better choice than her often very Conservative challengers. While Long lost a loyal voting bloc in Ojai when her district was redrawn, she gained an equally loyal voting bloc in Somis. More importantly, she was able to focus on her core constituency of Hispanic voters in Camarillo, South Oxnard, and Port Hueneme, and Fillmore. Since then, she has easily won reelection, but not without some disappointment from many Latino activists.

The vast majority of the supervisors themselves supported the changes proposed by the VCRTF. The VCRTF also met with Ventura County Star Editorial Board, to explain what was going on with the redistricting process. As a result they got favorable press from the editorial board, and were also allowed to pen some Op Eds. Heads of the Republican and Democratic parties in Ventura County supported the VCRTF's redistricting recommendations. There ended up being no organized opposition to redrawing the districts.

LGBT Community as a "Community of Interest"

Karl Lawson in an interview on August 26th, 2009, says "The concept of community of interest has been defined and refined by 60 years of federal court decisions. Every one of those decisions requires some sort of geographical contiguity in order for an interest group to be placed into a single district. So if there is a geographical concentration of LGBT citizens living in one area, it would be an easy matter to argue that they should not be divided up into multiple districts, but rather should be maintained in one district to maximize their voting power." It's a delicate process though, and according to Lawson, if the communities containing large

concentrations of LGBT individuals are numerous and spread out over the county, it will make it difficult to create one district encompassing them all. “The Supreme Court has recently thrown out Congressional districts that snake around an area to pick up small pockets of widely-separated citizens of a specific ethnic group in order to place them into the same voting district. For example, if there are four pockets of LGBT citizens (or Muslims, or any other group), spread out among the county (i.e., one in Ventura, one in Oxnard, one in TO, and one in Simi Valley), it would probably be ruled unlawful to draw district lines in order to bring those groups into one crazy-shaped district. In short, to be a community of interest for the purpose of drawing district lines, there must be a relative geographic concentration of people sharing the same characteristic living close to each other, so that they can be placed in the same district while maintaining geographic compactness to some degree” (K. Lawson, personal communication, August 29, 2009).

According to many activists, and LGBT individuals, there is a need for more County Board of Supervisors that support and represent the interest of the LGBT community. Most, including myself, would argue that the current Board of Supervisor’s is not hostile towards LGBT individuals or issues. It simply isn’t active or proactive in ensuring greater equality and visibility for LGBT individuals. In Ventura County, LGBT issues are still controversial for many, and it’s likely that many supervisors prefer to not wade into the waters on what could potentially be divisive issues. For instance, while many counties and cities across the state have issued statements supporting marriage-equality, Ventura County has been silent on this issue. As Karl Lawson points out, these statements have no legal authority, but are a good way to keep an issue at the forefront, and to show solidarity with an often discriminated community.

Again, this doesn't mean the supervisors are anti-LGBT, rather they simply aren't active in issues affecting the LGBT community. Lawson says "The individual supervisors represent their constituencies, especially those sectors of their constituency that vote. Former Supervisor John Flynn always expressed support for gay rights. I do not know the positions of the current Board members. I am not aware of any supervisors (or County Board actions) that are openly hostile to gay rights" (K. Lawson, personal communication, August 29, 2009).

Cristina Gonzalez grew up in Oxnard, and is a self described LGBT activist. Through her employer, The Fund for Santa Barbara, she has worked with the Latino LGBT community in Santa Barbara to help provide them with better services, and has organized a focus group targeting Spanish speaking farm workers who are so often living in the shadows because of their legal status and because of their sexuality. In an interview on September 18th 2009, she told me she believes the issues affecting the gay community in Santa Barbara mirror that of Ventura, especially among the Latino community. Cristina and I agreed that a significant portion of the gay community that are "out" in Ventura County are Latino, many of whom Spanish is their first language. Oxnard, the city with the largest Hispanic population in Ventura County, has come a long way over the years (C. Gonzalez, personal communication, September 18th 2009). In my last visit there in August of 2009, I even saw a lesbian couple and a gay couple casually holding hands, walking down the street, which something I never saw in the 3 years I lived there from 2000 to 2002. Obviously, Oxnard still has a ways to go, as evidenced by last year's murder of Lawrence King, a gay 15 year old boy, who was shot by a fellow student who was offended by his sexuality.

Cristina Gonzalez says having LGBT activists take part in the next Ventura County Board of Supervisor redistricting process, would be a good opportunity for the gay community to be proactive for once. "As we've seen, the LGBT community has been notorious for being "reactive" over the years; we only react once something bad has happened to us. We are rarely successful at being proactive in setting the agenda. This would be the perfect opportunity to change that" (C. Gonzalez, personal communication, September 18th 2009). Jay Smith, the Executive Director for the Ventura County Rainbow Alliance agrees. In an interview on August 27th 2009, he told me "Time and time again, the LGBT community is slow to respond to issues that affect us, and when we do, we are usually not organized, or unified in our message and approach. This was especially true with Prop 8. We responded too late to the challenge, and we did not make a clear and concise reason for why the public should not support it. Especially in Ventura County, the LGBT community, by and large, are not active in publicly supporting LGBT issues and interests. More people from the LGBT community should have been involved in the defeat of Prop 8. Instead, it was really our straight allies that stepped up, and took on the fight for us, which is great, but we can't have other people fighting our battles for us...being proactive on an issue such as redistricting could help in changing the atmosphere surrounding LGBT issues in Ventura County." So what's wrong with the atmosphere in Ventura County in relation to LGBT issues? Smith says "A few years back, there was an LGBT organization called the Gold Coast Business & Professionals Association. If you owned a business, you could be a member whether you were gay or straight. The point of the organization was to support businesses in the Ventura and Santa Barbara County that were welcoming toward the LGBT community. However, we found that many businesses didn't want their name associated with a

gay organization, even those owned by LGBT individuals. Most did not want to make a statement, or to put themselves out there on what are still controversial issues in this county.” Smith says he’s hasn’t heard any instances of the city government making life difficult for gay establishments, and says the police department, and many city officials have been supportive of the VCRA, of Ventura Pride, and even Paddy’s, the main gay bar in Ventura. However he believes this attitude expressed by citizens, both gay and straight, to suppress LGBT identity, is damaging to the goal of an equal society. He recounts an example of this in the awarding a grant to the VCRA. “In 2008, the VCRA received a Social Justice Grant from the Ventura County Community Foundation. However, when they held their annual fundraising dinner, we were disinvited from attending because VCCF officials feared our presence might cost them donors.” Perhaps more than anything, this example demonstrates the “closeted” nature of LGBT life in Ventura County (J. Smith, personal communication, August 27th 2009).

While Smith says the Ventura County Board of Supervisors has not been discriminatory in its actions, it has also done very little to publicly support LGBT issues. Smith says that Supervisor Bennett is by far the most supportive supervisor on the board, attending many VCRA events, and even watching the 2008 election results from the lobby of the VCRA. But even Bennett isn’t likely to push the board in supporting LGBT resolutions such as a declaration supporting marriage equality, something many other counties have done in recent years. He’s the lone voice on a board that rarely addresses the needs and concerns of the LGBT community (J. Smith, personal communication, August 27th 2009).

All five Supervisors were contacted for this project. However, only a two of them responded. From District 5, Stan Hakes, Supervisor John Zaragoza's Chief of Staff responded to my questions with the following statement: "It is a rare occasion for a specific LGBT issue to come before the Board of Supervisors. Currently none come to mind. He (Supervisor Zaragoza) supports the rights of adults to make their own personal decisions, without the intrusion of government into their private lives, and believes that all residents should be treated fairly and equitably under the law, without discrimination toward race, religion, gender, national origin or sexual orientation" (S. Hakes, personal correspondence, August 26th 2009). Kathy Long, Supervisor from District 3, was the only Supervisor to address all my questions. When asked about her overall views toward the LGBT community, she responded "I have always been supportive of the LGBT community, supporting their events, fundraising and programs they offer to the community. They do an excellent job in supporting their community." She personally supports marriage equality, but doesn't believe the Board of Supervisors has any role in the issue. "As one Supervisor, I support marriage equality --I do believe it should be acted on the state/federal level, not county by county" (K. Long, personal correspondence, August 30th 2009).

Of particular importance is services available to the LGBT community and "at risk" LGBT youth in Ventura County. She feels the county is heading in the right direction, but more could be done. "I think the current programs do an excellent job with limited resources. I do think more could be done for the youth at risk, particularly in the public education, starting with our schools. It is a problem when teens don't have safe venues to be themselves and to talk with others on what they face. I think the east-county leaders should discuss this gap and do

everything they can to address it. I believe the countywide Aids Advisory Commission could assist in addressing this gap. ” She doesn’t seem to view the LGBT community as a “community of interest” but feels that greater LGBT acceptance and representation will come from LGBT officials being elected. “I believe the "community of interest" is a broader term for the greater community not for the subsets of the population, but more appropriately to provide for representation for the greater good of the entire community. I believe advocacy and serving in public office, as appointees or elected will continue to break down barriers of discrimination and that would achieve same representation for the LGBT community” (K. Long, personal correspondence, August 30th 2009).

Another serious issue impacting Ventura County, was the 2008 murder of Lawrence King. How the Supervisor’s have responded to this tragedy gives some indication of how committed they are to the LGBT community. Long believes she has done everything in her power to address this tragedy and to try to prevent something like this from ever happening again. “I have worked with the LGBT community in response to the Larry King tragedy to encourage public education and have spoken to school board members/superintendents regarding same. It has to start there and the County Board of Education could help in leading same. I have spoken with members of that board also. I participated in community forum immediately following the tragedy; I supported immediate engagement of our behavioral health specialists to respond to students, teachers and parents with support, and again working closely with the community to continue the education necessary to sensitize to the issues with bullying and discrimination. I have supported anti-bullying legislation and encourage the schools to do more to intervene and education students on acceptance of differences” (K. Long,

personal correspondence, August 30th 2009). Karl Lawson seems to support the idea that the supervisors have for the most part, done what they can do, but could potentially do more to foster an atmosphere of tolerance. “The County has no legal authority over the school district where the shooting took place, and has no legal authority to enact any gun control regulations. As far as the future, I believe that the County has the same moral obligation as everyone else in our community has (including school districts and their employees, but also including parents, fellow students): teach tolerance, encourage students to report threats, and provide intervention when appropriate to head off future tragedies” (K. Lawson, personal communication, August 29, 2009). Jay Smith feels more should have been done, and needs to be done. “I don’t feel like the Board of Supervisors has weighed in publicly on the King murder. The Board of Education has made a statement, but the Oxnard School District has dropped the ball, and has continued to resist efforts by the VCRA to educate the teachers and students on the warning signs of violence and discrimination.” Smith does say that the Ventura School District on the other hand, has been very proactive, including diversity training with administrators, staff, and students. He says this training is already paying off. There was a student this last school year, who’s situation was very similar to Lawrence King, including the fact that he dressed in a non-gender conforming way. Rather than ignoring the student as they did with King, school officials contacted behavioral health, who then got the VCRA involved. Since then, the student has been working with the proper channels to make sure no discrimination or bullying occurs, and student in his school have received diversity education by the agency. It’s now up to Oxnard to follow suite, but it will likely take a more active role from

County officials to make that happen. So far, they have been very resistant to VCRA or Behavioral Health involvement (J. Smith, personal communication, August 27th 2009).

Long doesn't believe city or county agencies have shown any discrimination against gay establishments in Ventura County, but says "I will always support the LGBT community to fight such discrimination and I will work to remove prejudices thru education and advocacy" (K. Long, personal correspondence, August 30th 2009). Lawson says "I am aware of local governments making it very hard for new liquor licenses to be approved in existing neighborhoods (not just for gay establishments but for anyone seeking a new liquor license; almost any time a new liquor license is applied for, neighborhood activists and existing bars express their opposition, usually very loudly). I am absolutely confident that there are no ordinances that single out gay establishments for tougher enforcement or set higher standards for a gay establishment to gain approval. There is not a single city attorney in California who would ever present such a facially-discriminatory ordinance to a city council" (K. Lawson, personal communication, August 29, 2009). Lastly, Long stated "I staffed the Aids Advisory Commission as former Supervisor Maggie Kildee's assistant, gaining much of my understanding of the needs of the community. It was in the early 90's and the clinic to treat AIDS was underway, but struggling. It was the Supervisors support via health care that the clinic remained a priority. I believe in that priority and have been a leader in advocating for the Syringe Replacement program, that Dr. Robert Levin brought to our Board and I strongly advocated for. That program has been successful, even with limited resources. I also advocated in my early term to have the annual AIDS report brought to the Board for public presentation. All of this is in addition to my long time commitment to the gay community to listen to their

needs and to support them whenever and however possible” (K. Long, personal correspondence, August 30th 2009).

Patricia Navarro is a middle-class mom from Simi Valley, a city in eastern Ventura County. She has been involved in LGBT issues since the 1980’s when her son came out to her. She has worked tirelessly on behalf of many organizations, and has served since the 1990’s on the Ventura County AIDS Advisory Committee. Representing Simi Valley which resides in the Fourth District, she has served on behalf of mostly conservative Republican county supervisors. Current Supervisor Peter Foy is no exception. While Patricia’s politics are very different than Foy and many of his predecessors, she says she has always been impressed with supervisor’s commitment to issues related to HIV and AIDS. The supervisors rely on Patricia for recommendations as to how the county can better respond to AIDS prevention and treatment, and for the most part, her recommendations have been followed. While this is encouraging, she points out that government bodies such as the Ventura County Board of Supervisors will need to take a more active role in LGBT issues in order to fill the void left by the closure of many gay and lesbian organizations across the county as a result of state, and federal budget cuts, and as a result of donation dollars being diverted to political campaigns, such as marriage equality, rather than the local gay and lesbian community center (P. Navarro, personal communication, October 5th 2009). For example, the Ventura County Rainbow Alliance lost \$400,000 in funding from the state of California this year, and last year they lost a significant amount in charitable donations from local donors, who instead chose to give to organizations such as “Equality California” in order to help defeat the anti-gay marriage proposition, Prop 8. This loss in funding means the VCRA will be less visible and active in the community and will be offering fewer

services to the community. Among the consequences of these budget cuts that the center was forced to scrap the Pride in the Park festival, forced to eliminate the bi-lingual case manager position, forced to suspend Executive Director's salary, reduced to part-time the Director of Mental Health, pantry temporarily shuttered in July, forced to eliminate Coordinator position, forced to eliminate Director of Case Management, forced to eliminate HIV Education & Prevention position, and loss of property located at 4567 Telephone Road, Ventura (J. Smith, personal communication, August 27th 2009). Patricia can attest to the importance of LGBT visibility in a community. She believes it was the stigma of homosexuality, and lack of public services and information available to LGBT individuals in the 1980's that led her young son to live in secrecy, venturing out to West Hollywood, and engaging in risky behavior with people he didn't even know. She believes these circumstances contributed to her son contracting HIV, and that perhaps, if there had been a VCRA, and a Youth Empowerment group for LGBT teens when her son was going through the coming out process, the outcome might have been different (P. Navarro, personal communication, October 5th 2009). Things have gotten better since the 1980's, but this story is still far too common, even today. Again, with a contraction in the size and scope of many LGBT community organizations like the VCRA, there will be an increased importance in making strides towards LGBT equality and representation in other areas, such as the Ventura County Board of Supervisors. There are some examples to suggest that other avenues for expanding the rights and protections of LGBT individuals beyond the conventional community center are already taking place. In 2008, just prior to the murder of Lawrence King, then sixteen-year-old Zak Krevitt founded the Westlake High School Gay/Straight alliance. He says "The horrific murder of Lawrence opened up a dialogue among the members of the

Gay/Straight Alliance at Westlake High. Some of us went to the candlelight vigil in Los Angeles. I saw the need for an event geared toward the LGBT community where we could have fun and take pride in ourselves” (Dolye, April 29, 2008). In Sacramento, lawmakers are “considering a bill that has come to be known as “Larry’s Law,” a measure that would require teachers to report to the principal any observed act of harassment against a student” (Herdt, May 6, 2008). And in Washington D.C., Representative Lois Capps recently became one of the founding members of a congressional caucus that will focus on gay and lesbian equality. Capps wants to use the caucus to foster better communication, and hopefully prevent another tragedy like the King murder. “We need to find ways to communicate with young people about acceptance and tolerance” (Collins, June 9, 2008). If these other agencies can take a larger role ensuring equality for LGBT individuals, it seems the Ventura County Board of Supervisors can do the same.

Using Data to Create Better LGBT Representation

While everyone I spoke to agreed that better LGBT representation on the Ventura County Board of Supervisors is needed, and would be a positive step for Ventura County’s LGBT community, almost everyone questioned how this could be accomplished. Jay Smith from the VCRA says “I think it would be great, but I don’t even know how you begin to carry that out” (J. Smith, personal communication, August 27th 2009). Karl Lawson, who led the Ventura County Redistricting Task Force in 2001, says that while he believes the LGBT community qualifies as a community of interest, it will only be actionable if there is data showing clear areas of high LGBT concentration in the county, and those neighborhoods need to be in fairly close proximity

as to not create a district that “snakes around an area to pick up small pockets of widely-separate citizens of a specific group in order to place them in the same voting district” (K. Lawson, personal communication, August 29, 2009). I believe this can be accomplished by importing data into the Maptitude redistricting software from one or two data sources.

The first data source is 2010 Census information that will now include information on same-sex couples. According to Ramon in Johnson in piece titled “What Gays Need to Know About the 2010 Census”, previous attempts to get same-sex information on the Census have been fought by the Clinton and Bush administrations, arguing that the Defense of Marriage Act makes it legal to not recognize gay unions. However, on June 19th 2009, the Obama administration announced that it will be collecting information on same-sex couples for first time ever on the 2010 Census. Same-sex couples will now be classified as “unmarried partners” on the census questionnaire. The caveat is that the census likely will only record same-sex couples that live together, and not lesbian or gay individuals. Respondents can only designate male or female, so the questionnaire will not account for gender identity or expression. This is still a major step forward, and one that was unexpected. Most believed that Obama would use DOMA as an excuse not to change the Census, as previous administrations had done, so it came as a shock when the Census Bureau announced it would start a more accurate accounting gays and lesbians in the United States, and LGBT organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign have set up websites instructing gay couples on how to fill out the census properly. It is this information that can be used by the redistricting task force in 2011 in order to draw up district(s) that would provide better representation and support to the LGBT community living in Ventura County. I would assume that since the information is coming from the census bureau

like the other information that is usually entered into Maptitude, formatting and access to this information should be very easy. Of course, without knowing the results of the census and whether or not there are areas of large LGBT concentration, it's impossible to know whether the districts could be drawn in a way to better count and represent the LGBT community. It must also be pointed out that this is the first census that has looked for this information, which means there is a potential for errors in both counting by the bureau, and by individuals who may not know how to fill that part of the questionnaire out properly. It's also worth noting that there are many in the gay community who live on the "down-low" or in the closet, and may choose to not fill the form out accurately for fear of someone finding out they are gay. Nevertheless, this information should still provide a worthwhile gauge of what potential areas house a large concentration of LGBT couples. Patricia Navarro says "it's wonderful that the census is finally starting to account for the growing gay and lesbian population in this country. To not use this information in a way that betters the gay and lesbian community would be a real tragedy" (P. Navarro, personal communication, October 5th 2009).

The second information source that could be used in addition to, or instead of the Census information, would be reviewing voting results from 2008's Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage in the state of California. By looking at which voting precincts overwhelmingly voted "No" on Prop 8, an assumption can be made that these communities will be more likely to vote in support of LGBT issues, and LGBT political candidates. Jay Smith from the VCRA believes this could possibly be the best piece of information to use for a redistricting. He says what we learned from the Prop 8 situation, was that most of our best allies are in the straight community. We also know that the gay community in Ventura County is by and large,

not very active. Many people decide to stay in the closet, or live in the shadows, rather than get involved. By looking at how people voted on an issue like marriage-equality, we can see what communities are most willing to use the power of voting to advance the rights, protections, and representation of gay and lesbian Americans (J. Smith, personal communication, August 27th 2009). Of course there is no guarantee that any of the precincts will have voted overwhelmingly against Prop 8, in which case it would be difficult to make a case for using this data as guide for redrawing the district lines. Nevertheless, like the Census information, it is worth reviewing this information to see what can be gleaned from it, and it would be my recommendation to use this data in conjunction with the 2010 Census data on same-sex couples.

Activists Involvement in Better LGBT Representation

When asked what specific LGBT activists might be interested in the 2011 redistricting process, Karl Lawson said the following; "I know many people who are very interested in the redistricting process for many reasons. Some of them may be gay, and I may not be aware of this fact. I have been involved in community organizations in Ventura County for 30 years, and the local gay community leadership has traditionally focused their efforts on service-provision issues (i.e., AIDS program funding, etc.). You are the first person who has posed this question about long-range political power. About 15 years ago or so, an openly gay fellow named Tom Swann (if I recall his name correctly) ran as a candidate in a primary for a state assembly seat here. He did not win his party's nomination. There have no doubt been other gay or lesbian candidates for local office over the years, but I do not recall anyone openly-gay candidate other than Swann running on a pro-gay rights platform. In recent decades, virtually every Democrat

running in partisan races has expressed support for that party's pro-gay rights platform, as have some Republicans” (K. Lawson, personal communication, August 29, 2009).

Jay Smith believes that many of the activists involved in the Prop 8 rallies, as well as those involved with LGBT organizations, would likely be helpful and interested in assisting with the redistricting process. “Ron Suckle, President of the Stonewall Democrats would likely be interested in being involved. We’ve worked with Ron before in helping to clarify the message of the VCRA, and he’s proven to be a real asset to the community.” Smith also believes activists involved with “Ventura County Color” might have an interest in being involved in this process when the time comes. “Ventura County Color” was started by two gay men, outraged over the military’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”, and has become a gay/straight alliance at the forefront of the marriage-equality issue in Ventura County. They helped collect signatures for the “Let California Ring” as well as led protests once marriage-equality was stripped away by the voters. Smith does caution that the tactics used by “Ventura County Color” can sometimes be shocking and graphic, which might not always be in the best interest of the gay community as a whole (J. Smith, personal communication, August 27th 2009).

Cristina Gonzalez says she would be willing to assist in the redistricting process anyway she can. Because she now spends most of her time in Santa Barbara County, she believes there are probably more qualified people to be part of this process, but says she is friends with other activists in Ventura County, who might also be interested in being part of this process (C. Gonzalez, personal communication, September 18th 2009). She referred me to Raquel Bernaldo, who works for an organization called “Just Communities Central Coast”, an

organization that “advances justice by building leadership, fostering change, and dismantling all forms of prejudice, discrimination and oppression.” I spoke with Raquel about assisting with this project. She responded “While I do not have experience working with the Board of Supervisors or drawing up districts, I have worked a lot in queer communities throughout California. Specifically in Ventura County, I have worked with Queer youth and am familiar with the Ventura County Rainbow Alliance services. I would like to support your efforts” (R. Bernaldo, personal correspondence, October 5th 2009).

Summary

Clearly, there is a need for better representation and activism on behalf of the LGBT community as there continues to be an atmosphere of homophobia in much of Ventura County’s politics and culture. While the Ventura County Board of Supervisors aren’t in any way “anti-gay”, they also aren’t being proactive in dealing with LGBT issues, rights, and protections. As I’ve laid out in this research project, data will be available for the next redistricting process that could give county activists a great tool in creating districts that are more friendly towards the LGBT community. There also are plenty of LGBT activists in Ventura County who would likely be interested in taking part in the next redistricting process. Whether or not that data will conclusively show areas in the county that are gay-friendly is unknown, but the case has been made that it’s definitely worth the time and effort. It’s very possible that the next step forward in the march towards full equality for LGBT individuals in Ventura County might depend on the actions taken in this next redistricting process.

Bibliography

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