The names and signatures of 4,000 Huntington residents were packaged in boxes and rolled into town hall April 22 on a red hand truck.

It had taken 12 months to collect those names, but proponents of a move to change the town's government from an at-large elected council to district representation said they had no choice.

"The at-large system worked in the past, when the town was small, but we have outgrown it," said Paul Johnson, chairman of the Coalition of Councilmanic Seats for the Town of Huntington and a registered Democrat.

Huntington Town, with a population of more than 200,000, would be better represented if it were divided into districts and the residents elected council members from those wards, Johnson said.

The Huntington effort is the latest in a trend that has spread across Long Island in recent years.

The Town of Hempstead was first. Spurred by a U.S. Supreme Court decision, the town changed to a district structure in 2000 after the court ruled minorities were denied adequate representation by the at-large system.

Brookhaven changed its system in 2002 and North Hempstead in 2003, after residents voted for geographical representation.

Pros and cons

"Council districts provide greater accountability," said Chris O'Connor, vice president of government affairs for the Farmingdale-based Long Island Neighborhood Network, a council-district advocacy group. Minorities and neighborhood civic leaders are much more likely to be elected on a district basis, he added.

But Todd Donovan, a political science professor at Western Washington University in Bellingham, Wash., said that under the at-large system, voters are more likely to elect "centrist candidates - since board members are answerable to all voters."

With redistricting, there is a greater likelihood that there will be fringe representatives who cater to the narrow interests of a district, Donovan added.

The drive for change also can be politically motivated, said Jeffrey Haber, executive director of the Association of Towns of the State of New York. The political party that is out of power wants it, he said, "especially if there's an opportunity to pick up a district."

The dominant party generally opposes it, Haber said.

In Islip, where Republicans hold all four seats, the board members don't want any changes to the electoral system, O'Connor said. Huntington councilman Mark Cuthbertson, a Democrat from Greenlawn, said the move toward council districts in the Democrat-dominated town is politically motivated - with many of the proponents for the council districts being Republicans.
Long Island residents often know little about the workings of their town's electoral system.

"I typically spend 20 minutes at each person's home explaining the whole process," said Felicia Pasculli, an Islip attorney who is spearheading the redistricting campaign there. "I have to start at the beginning since most people don't even know what the at-large system is."

When race is an issue

The Town of Hempstead's system was changed after a suit brought by minorities who alleged they weren't represented under the at-large system.

The town, the largest in the United States with 725,000 residents, had a black population of 88,000 in 1990 that was growing rapidly. After a long legal battle, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that blacks in the town were not being represented fairly and called for the creation of council districts. One contiguous district dominated by black constituents was formed.

The court's ruling also had an impact in North Hempstead, a town that was seeing its minority population climb.

May Newburger, a former North Hempstead supervisor and an advocate for council districts, said there were minority areas in that town that lacked representation. "Areas like New Cassel, Westbury and Carle Place didn't seem to get represented," Newburger said, adding that New Cassel was not neglected, "it was ignored."

Most town board candidates came from "the northern part of town or New Hyde Park," she added.

For courts to mandate council districts on racial grounds, the plaintiff must show that a contiguous district can be created where the majority of the population is of a given race, said Edward Still, a Birmingham, Ala.-based attorney specializing in voting rights.

But districts created with minorities in mind could hurt these communities, said Seth Forman, a researcher at the Center for Regional Policy Studies at Stony Brook University.

"It might dilute minority power," Forman said. If a minority district is created, council members from the other parts of town could just cater to their constituents and forget about minorities, Forman said. Under the at-large system, he said, "everyone has to be a little concerned with minority issues."

In Brookhaven, the call for council districts was less based on race than representative government, advocates said.

Better representation

In campaigning for the district system, O'Connor told residents that they would have a board member who would attend local civic meetings, as well as to handle district issues. And if residents weren't happy with their local representative, they would be better able to vote that person out.

Brookhaven voters approved the district system 51 percent to 49 percent in
One strong opponent at the time is now more comfortable with the change. Brookhaven Supervisor John Jay LaValle said: "I feared that a majority of council people might gang up against one member's district," but it hasn't happened.

LaValle said he worried that town zoning policy might suffer as board members would focus on their individual districts. "So far, it's worked," LaValle said. Board members have reduced the town's workload by taking care of constituents on a local level, he said.

Still some holdouts

Although an advocate for district representation, O'Connor, of Farmingdale's Neighborhood Network, said small towns are still being served well by the at-large system.

Riverhead, with a population of 30,000, is one of those towns. "We are a small town, not a city or a large town like Brookhaven, so there is no need," said Phil Cardinale, the town supervisor.

Battles are looming, however, in larger towns such as Islip, with a population of 330,000. Pasculli is in the midst of a second petition drive to put the redistricting system up for vote. Last year, more than 7,000 signatures were gathered - 3,800 were required - but they were invalidated. The town ruled that the language petitioners used when collecting signatures didn't follow town law.

Community advocates expect to get the signatures they need by July and are seeking a referendum shortly afterward.

If all goes well in Huntington, the vote on whether to keep the at-large system or bring change will take place in November.

In Babylon, meanwhile, William Hill, a member of the West Babylon Taxpayers Association, said he began collecting signatures April 28 so the system can be put up for a vote.

"The people should decide," he said.

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