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Letters to Mr. Earnest Nijem from Georgia Legal Services: Todd Johnson, Kenneth Jones, Robert W. Cullen, 1983 June 17

Houseal, Willie H.

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June 14, 1983

Mr. Earnest Nijem
Mayor of the City of Valdosta

Dear Mayor Nijem:

During the last few years we have been approached by Black citizens of Valdosta concerning voting rights issues in Valdosta. With a population in excess of 35% in Valdosta, Blacks have traditionally been underrepresented on the City Council. In fact, only one Black person has ever served on the City Council.

Although some may want to point to other reasons for this underrepresentation, the system of elections stands out as the major stumbling block to the election of a Black on the council. In 1963, during the drives to register Black voters in Georgia and around the time that President Kennedy introduced the voting rights legislation, the Valdosta City Council changed its method of elections, making it more difficult (although, as Ms. Council has shown, not impossible) for a Black to be elected.

Recently, we have been retained by a number of Black registered voters in the City of Valdosta and a Black community group who feel that the present system of electing the Valdosta City Council makes it impossible for Blacks to be fairly represented and elected. Our clients feel that a single member district system for the City Council is necessary to satisfy their needs and alleviate the concerns of the Black community. We are hopeful that a single member district system can be arranged through negotiation. Your help in fashioning such a system would be appreciated.

The legal claims of our clients are set out on the attached page. The proof of many of these issues and the defense of the issues could require an incredible amount of time and money. With the new voting rights legislation, expert witnesses are necessary for many parts of these cases. In addition, great masses of data have to be compiled. Costs of litigation will be very high.

We are hopeful that no suit will be necessary and that good faith negotiations during the next sixty days will lead to an amicable resolution of the issues we have raised with the present system of elections. Our basic position is that only a single member district election system will be acceptable. However, such issues as district lines, the cutting short of terms and timing are all negotiable.

Different cities have approached these difficult issues in different ways. In a time when the courts and the law are in favor of the establishment of district systems to combat this historic under-representation, many city councils have felt that litigation would be a waste of the taxpayer's money. Responsible settlement at this time will save the public the costs and even more importantly the agony of this litigation while creating a more responsive and better form of government for Valdosta. We hope to hear from you soon.

Sincerely,



TODD JOHNSON
GEORGIA LEGAL SERVICES PROGRAM

KENNETH JONES
GEORGIA LEGAL SERVICES PROGRAM



ROBERT W. CULLEN
GEORGIA LEGAL SERVICES PROGRAM