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Voter fraud found in Vernon election, new winner named

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A hearing officer on Monday concluded that voter fraud occurred during Vernon's June City Council election, throwing out seven of the 64 ballots cast and declaring a new winner in the race.

The decision by former Superior Court Judge Debra Yang came after an unusual hearing process last month at City Hall in which dozens of voters were questioned about their commuting patterns, financial histories and even Facebook pages. Yang concluded that five of the voters in question were not residents of the city. Two others, she said, did not properly mail in their ballots.

If approved by the City Council, the decision would tilt the race in favor of candidate Luz Martinez, a former secretary to Vernon's top administrator, who had trailed 34 votes to 30. It would also reverse a previous decision made by the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder, which dismissed the voter challenges this summer and called the race for Martinez' opponent, Reno Bellamy.

Fredric Woocher, the lawyer representing the city's Chamber of Commerce, which brought the challenges, called the decision a vindication Monday, saying it showed democracy could work in Vernon despite its population of just 112 people.

"The Chamber felt the election had been stolen, and they went out there to prove it," Woocher said. "This will go a long way to making sure elections in Vernon are conducted fairly in the future."

In several instances, Yang wrote, there was "clear and convincing evidence," that voters did not live in Vernon. Bernard Roberts, for example, openly admitted during his testimony that he lived in Arizona. "I just visit [Vernon]; I don't live here. I visit all over the country, if I get the chance," the 90-year old Roberts said.

But Yang also sided against the Chamber in two cases where voters claimed multiple residences.

On Monday, Bellamy called the hearing process "bogus" and said he was considering further legal action. He pointed out that the city created the judicial proceeding only after the registrar ruled in his favor, and that Yang had been paid nearly \$1,000 an hour for her work.

"The city government itself ran this show," Bellamy said. "When it comes to an election, they shouldn't be playing that part. They shouldn't have any say in who wins—that's more corrupt than the old Chicago mob."

A Vernon spokesman declined to comment Monday afternoon.

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--Sam Allen

Photo: Attorney Fredric Woocher questions David Roberts about his Vernon residency during election "trial" at Vernon City Hall in September. Credit: Irfan Khan / Los Angeles Times

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