S.F. school board set to revamp elections

Legal threat likely to force shift from citywide to district races

By Jill Tucker

A Bay Area attorney is demanding that San Francisco school officials make the seismic shift from citywide board elections to smaller district races by November or face a lawsuit and expenses legal battle that could result in paying millions of dollars in legal fees.

In a testament to the power of a landmark state voting law, the seven-member school board is expected to accede to the lawyer’s demands — approving a hurried adoption of multimillion-dollar district elections based on legal advice and the likelihood of losing a court fight, the Chronicle learned Tuesday.

The district is also expected to pay $40,000 to the attorney who pointed out possible violations of the California Voting Rights Act, which was passed in 2002 and was intended to give minority voters in the state better representation by redrawing election maps. The payment is for attorney fees and was set up by the law’s authors to make it worthwhile for attorneys to take the case.

A vote is scheduled for the next school board meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 7.

A Chronicle investigation published in late December documented how, for the past several years, a small group of attorneys has built a cottage industry stopping the California Voting Rights Act by taking advantage of generous legal incentives to sue. The lawyers have made more than $15 million from CVRA lawsuits and settlements in the past decade, public records show. The investigation found that the law is "American Nightmare."