

Why won't Elections director put District 10 recall on Nov. 2 ballot?

Special election would cost hundreds of thousands and disenfranchise voters

"The recall of Supervisor Sophie Maxwell has really gotten people in the District 10 communities involved in politics," wrote Apollonia Jordan in the June 16 Bay View, alongside a picture of some of the hard-working signature gatherers, tired but smiling at the end of a long day.

This recall is the essence of democracy: citizens determining their own destiny. The thousands who eagerly signed the recall petition – far more than the 3,900 registered voters required – were exercising their right to choose as their district supervisor someone strong and effective enough to solve some of the City's worst problems, urgent problems, problems of life and death.

They expected to vote on the recall and a new District 10 supervisor in the general election Nov. 2. That's a presidential election, giving voters a chance to beat Bush, to elect lawmakers at every level, from Congress to the Board of Supervisors, and to decide the fate of a host of ballot measures. The turnout is predicted to be the highest in decades.

But Director of Elections John Arntz says no, an amendment to the City Charter requires a special election in December for the recall. We say that amendment puts the recall on the general election ballot.

The difference hinges on what the voters meant by the word "it" when they approved this Charter amendment in 1996. Arntz admits in a letter we received Thursday that our interpretation is "one possibility"; his is another. A member of the Elections Commission I spoke with says Arntz is dragging his feet.

More than two weeks after we submitted the signatures, on July 19, Arntz admits the Elections Department has not yet checked a single one. State law allows the sufficiency of the signatures to be decided simply by random sampling if a high enough percentage is found to be valid – that is, if the name and address of the petition signer appears on the City's "master voter file" of registered voters.

But in over two weeks, the Elections Department has not found the time even to perform the random sampling. Clearly, the recall is not a high priority.

What difference does it make if we vote on the recall in November or December? A difference of "hundreds of thousands of dollars" that a special election would cost, according to Arntz' letter – hundreds of thousands desperately needed in this budget crisis, especially in District 10, to save lives stalked by poverty and pollution.

And a difference that would further disenfranchise San Francisco's most disenfranchised voters. "For the last several elections," says well known activist Marie Harrison, a candidate for supervisor in District 10 in 2000, "District 10 has been another Florida. Voters, especially low-income Black voters and other voters of color, were intimidated and treated like criminals, just for wanting to vote.

"Many voters who live in public and subsidized housing were told that if they didn't vote right, they'd lose their homes – and they did," Harrison says. City statistics show that 67 percent of San Francisco's homeless people come from Bay View Hunters Point.

In a special election, with only the recall on the ballot, people going to the polls could come under suspicion for intending to vote the "wrong" way. The level of fear could rise; turnout, always low for a special election, could fall further. Is this democracy?

Recall proponents will attend the meeting of the Elections Commission Wednesday at 7 p.m. in Room 408 of City Hall. We will ask the commissioners to find a way to put the recall on the Nov. 2 general election ballot.

We will tell them how hard we tried to gather sufficient signatures sooner than the little over two months it took. And we will tell how little cooperation we got from the Elections Department – their 10-day delay in approving the petition at the beginning of the process and their refusal to give us an up-to-date "master voter file" until the last two and a half weeks.

We urge all San Franciscans who believe in democracy – and the press dedicated to keeping them an informed electorate – to join us at the Elections Commission meeting Wednesday.

The Civil Grand Jury, in a report last month, traced District 10's dire problems to 60 years of neglect by City Hall. Will City Hall fail us again?

Thousands of District 10 voters want desperately to determine our own destiny at the polls on Nov. 2. Let's see if San Francisco really is the city that knows how.