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Like black leaders in other cities, Clark feels at-large voting, in which all five Roanoke City Council members are elected by the entire city, discriminates against blacks. Roanoke is 37 percent black, but has an all-white council.

THE CITY elected one black, George Pool, who served from 1976 to 1980. Pool ran for re-election in 1980 and was defeated by a white. Two other blacks who ran in 1980 also lost, both by 2-1 margins.

Compounding the problem in Roanoke, blacks say, is the fact that the city has no wards: All council members could come from one area of town.

Because voting runs on racial lines, Clark says, there is "no way you can elect a black" under the present Roanoke system.

One white resident of Roanoke, who asked not to be identified, points to the election of Pool and says Clark's charges are "patently false." Pool, the resident says, "was well thought of by everybody and he was just a good citizen." The other black candidates, he says, lost to better qualified opponents.

Two weeks after Clark sent his letter, the council refused to change the city's electoral system. Mayor Henry "Spec" Bonner said at the time district voting would "make it easy for any special-interest group to hand pick an official."

More recently Bonner has said he would alter his position "if I could become convinced it (at-large) is racially discriminatory. . . . But I do not believe that it is. . . . If a black person is interested and qualified in Roanoke, Ala., then he will be elected."

FACED WITH Bonner's opposition, Clark has turned the challenge over to the NAACP's legal department in New York. Margaret Ford, an NAACP lawyer, says she hasn't studied the case enough to say whether a suit will be filed. But Earl Shinhoster, director of NAACP's Atlanta regional office, says a suit is likely. "We believe the present form of government (in Roanoke) is discriminatory," Shinhoster says.

Roanoke blacks say they have been talking about challenging the city's electoral system for some time. But Clark's letter in December was prompted by an Alabama Democratic Conference campaign launched that month to warn public officials in 40 Alabama counties and cities that they might face legal challenges if they didn't change their electoral systems.

Jerome Gray, ADC field director in Montgomery, says the group sent letters to local ADC representatives, including the Rev. R.L. Heflin of Roanoke, asking them to approach city and county officials with a request to change to single-member districts.

The ADC directive did not tell black leaders to threaten lawsuits, but Gray says in some cases the possibility of a lawsuit was an unspoken assumption.

In Roanoke's case, the threat was explicit. Clark wrote the council: "We certainly want to avoid the possibility of costly and time consuming litigation challenging the present form of government."

THE ADC campaign was a warning shot, Gray says. "We were trying to prime the pump. . . . We wanted to let them know. . . . You can avoid costly challenges if you change your form of government."

Only two — Evergreen and Greenville — of the 40 county or city governments voluntarily have changed from at-large to single-member districts. Most officials, Gray says, complained that they did not have time to study possible changes.

"We would have had two weeks to come up with a plan," Bonner says, adding that past differences with Roanoke's black leadership would have made it difficult to come up a quick and mutually acceptable solution.

Under Alabama law, changes in electoral systems must come at least six months before the next municipal elections. Roanoke would have had to adopt the change by Jan. 10. Clark's request was made Dec. 26.

Gray admits he did not give officials much time. But he says he didn't know until early December about the six-months rule.

"If we had known, we would have done this a year ago," he says.

Anniston officials, despite the state law, are going ahead with plans to change from at-large in time for this summer's municipal elections, even though the council did not take formal action until March.

City Attorney George Monk says state Legislature is considering a bill to exempt cities attempting to comply with the Voting Rights Act from the six-months law. If that fails, Monk says, Justice could sue, asking the federal courts to preempt the state law in favor of the Voting Rights Act.

EVERGREEN AND Greenville, the ADC's two successes, will be electing from single-member districts in July. Evergreen, the home of both Gray and ADC President Joe Reed, was sued successfully by the NAACP several years ago for discriminatory hiring practices. City Attorney Tommy Chapman says the present city administration had to pay legal fees from that case. But Chapman says the threat of other, costly litigation was not the deciding factor in the city's decision.

"I think they did what they thought was in the best interests of the citizens," Chapman says. It took the City Council less than three weeks to make the change.

Greenville faced the threat of a Justice suit because it had annexed land without

first getting required Justice approval. Justice gave the city a choice: give back the property, which diluted black voting strength, or go to single member districts.

In the opinion of Gray and lawyers involved in successful at-large challenges, Roanoke is a good target for a similar suit. Gray says courts favor suits against cities where black candidates have run unsuccessfully in the past, where voting seems to run along racial lines, and where a city is more than 20 percent black. All three apply to Roanoke.

IF A ROANOKE suit is filed, the city would join a long list of local governments embroiled in the at-large controversy.

Last December, blacks and civil rights lawyers filed a federal class-action suit against Bessemer which Justice joined as a plaintiff April 10.

A similar suit was filed against Troy last summer, but the City Council agreed in March to hold a referendum on the change. If the voters approve, the suit could be preempted.

A challenge against Opelika's electoral system filed in 1978 was overturned by U.S. District Judge Robert Varner in August 1982. Varner's decision has been appealed to the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta.

Southern Poverty Law Center lawyer Ira Bernham says lawyers are considering reopening a suit against Tuscaloosa.

Larry Menefee, a lawyer on the winning side in the Mobile case, says he filed suit Monday against the city

of Jackson. Alabaster went to single-member districts early last year after Justice said it, too, would have to give up annexed territory that could have diluted black voting strength, says City Attorney Bill Justice.

Montevallo made the change in September after a year of discussions. "Nobody on the council really opposed it," says City Attorney Jim Standridge. But ADC representative George Dailey says the change came only after ADC "let them know we would push it to whatever lengths we had to."

Last year, Anniston

sought Justice approval of redrawn ward lines, and Justice answered with a thinly veiled threat of suit unless the city moved to single member districts. The council took the hint, and recently adopted a ward plan.

The pattern seems clear. White officials will only move when threatened, directly or indirectly, with a lawsuit. But Gray and civil rights lawyers say that as more and more successful challenges are made, more officials will make the change voluntarily.

"There is going to be a domino effect out of all these challenges," Gray says.

Drug bucks fuel economy

MIAMI (AP) — The billions of dollars in narcotics profits that flows into South Florida each year has helped fuel a real-estate boom, enrich lawyers who defend drug smugglers and line the pockets of some lucky waiters at fashionable restaurants with \$100 tips.

"I can make enough money to run two cars and a boat," said a waiter in the trendy area Coconut Grove who asked not to be identified. He guessed that tips he receives from drug dealers amount to thousands of dollars a year.

After the meal, a smuggler might buy a new Mercedes, giving the car dealer a suitcase stuffed with \$60,000 cash — and the car dealer often "just smiles and puts it in the safe," said Geoffrey Alpert, a University of Miami criminology professor.

Few parts of the local economy have been untouched by the "narcodollars," but one of the most affected has been real estate. Drug dealers have been buying up everything from plush homes and condominiums to motels and office buildings.

Among recent property seized from alleged drug smugglers by the government is an 84-unit time-share resort near St. Petersburg; a gourmet restaurant in Charleston, S.C., and the mortgage on the Cricket Bait and Tackle Shop in Columbia, S.C.

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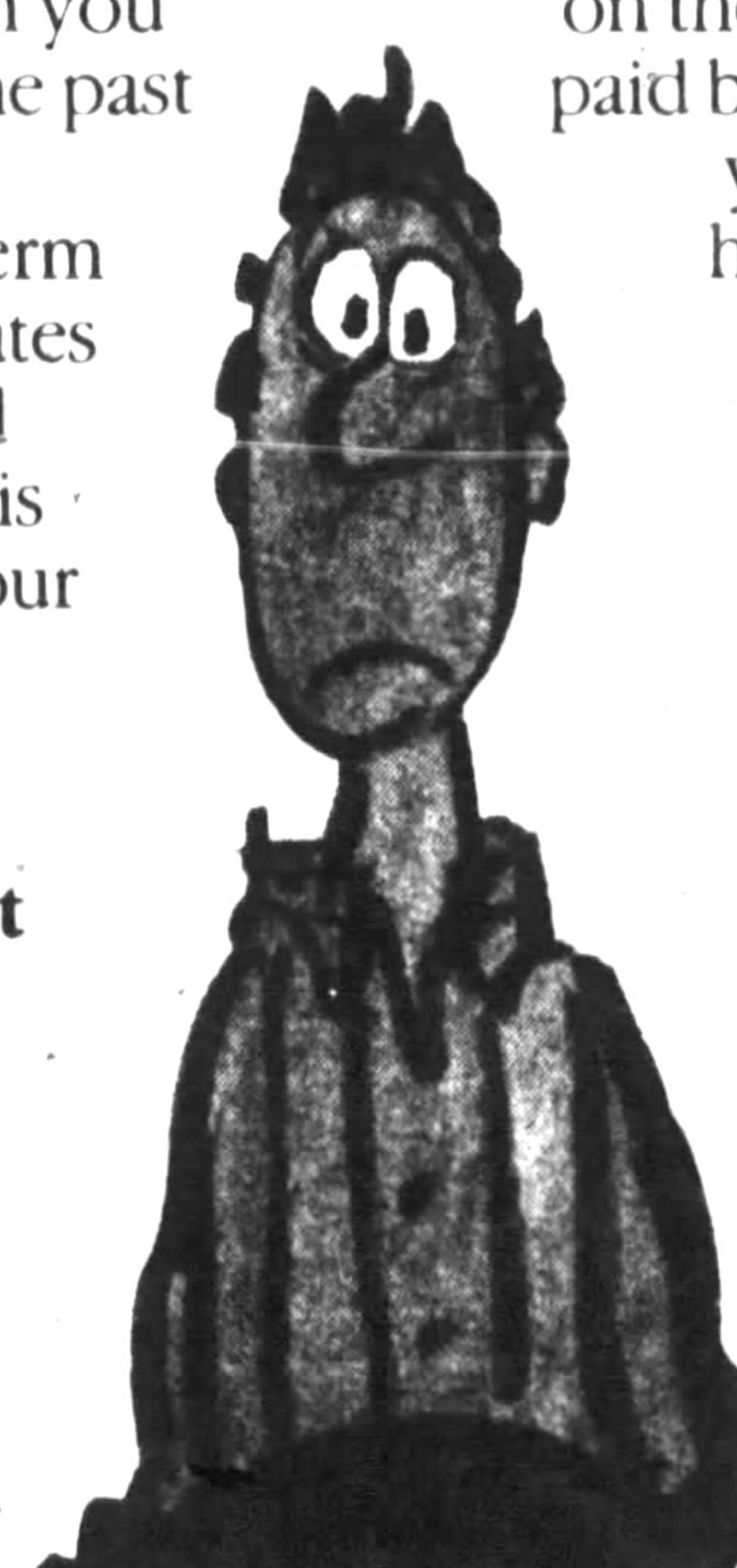
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