

Voting compromise collapses

By SCOTT WILLIAMS
of the Journal Star

The first serious opportunity for a peaceful settlement in the Peoria voting-rights case collapsed Wednesday in a bitter finale to an episode that all sides agreed has marred the chances for averting a courtroom battle.

The chief attorney behind the sweeping challenge on local election procedure withdrew a compromise proposal that had been hailed as a potential breakthrough but that he himself already had been backing away from.

Attorney James Craven made a special trip here from his Springfield law office to inform attorneys defending Peoria's election system that he was reverting to an all-or-nothing posture in settlement negotiations.

Later, Craven said his proposal for a compromise had been distorted, while the defense lawyers accused

Craven of creating a "mirage" by extending the offer without his clients' approval.

Whatever the precise dynamics behind the awkward weeklong exchange, it was clear Wednesday that the incident has severely diminished the prospects for an out-of-court settlement of case.

Immediately, a mediator from the U.S. Department of Justice canceled plans to travel to Peoria today. The trip had been intended to spark enough interest in Craven's proposal to engineer the first face-to-face negotiating session among the opposing sides.

The defense lawyers, who had previously hesitated even to acknowledge the proposal, convened a late afternoon press conference to publicize Craven's turnabout and to berate him for what they contend was a bad-faith offer.

"As a group of attorneys, we are all disappointed. We all thought

progress had been made," said James Casey, an attorney representing the City of Peoria.

"I never say anything has been permanently damaged," Casey added. "But I think it has been harmful."

When Craven later learned that his opponents had convened a press conference only minutes after he left their offices, he became angry that they did not invite him to stay and join them in explaining the situation.

And he vowed to fight back with a press conference of his own next week and a public disclosure of how much public funding the defendants have spent fighting what he says is a losing battle.

"If we're going to play silly, childish games," he said during a telephone interview from his home in Springfield, "then I'll get my bat and my glove and I'll get in the game."

Craven confirmed that he traveled to Peoria on Wednesday to re-

ject a potential compromise that he had injected into the case, but he refused to characterize it as a concrete offer.

The proposal involved a plan for eliminating the hotly disputed procedure of at-large voting and carving the Peoria area into two overlapping tiers of political representation.

The area first would be divided into conventional geographical voting districts and then divided a second time into larger regions that had been labeled "super districts."

The so-called super districts held the promise of bridging the gap between those who contend that at-large representation brings a healthy city-wide perspective to local government and those who claim that it disenfranchises blacks by diluting their votes.

Craven hinted earlier this week that he was having second thoughts

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