

Watsonville's majority a minority in government

Officials say racism, language problems keep Latinos from serving on committees

By KEITH MURAOKA
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Why are Latinos still a minority on city commissions and committees when they're a majority in Watsonville?

The answers vary.

Some claim racism is the culprit. Immigration problems with undocumented residents, and English-language barriers are also cited. Others maintain that no matter what their ethnic background, many residents simply do not have the time to commit to the city.

And city officials, including Mayor Todd McFarren, Vice Mayor Oscar Rios and 12-year Councilwoman Betty Murphy, say officials must try harder to attract Latinos.

Census figures show Watsonville is 61 percent Latino, but only 31.4 percent of the city's commissions is Latino. Rios is the only Latino

on the seven-member City Council.

Pedro Castillo, who serves on the city's Recreation and Parks Commission and the Watsonville Development Committee, said there is "an underlying tone of racism."

"I really think there is some fear from the white community that Latinos are going to take over," said the history professor at UC Santa Cruz and member of the League of United Latin American Citizens.

"I mean, we're all over the place, and they see us becoming more vocal," he said. "I don't like to use the word 'racism,' but I think there's an underlying tone of racism coming from the old-time white residents of Watsonville."

Vice Mayor Rios agreed, citing "discrimination and behind-the-scenes racism."

"There's a lot of subconscious fear of the unknown," Rios said.



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Oscar Rios and Pedro Castillo say racism is one factor keeping Latinos from serving in city government.

"It's hard for some people to see through it. They think we're going to take over."

Watsonville businessman Ralph Oliver, chairman of the
Please see LATINOS — A18

Hard work key to bringing Latinos into the system

WATSONVILLE — Despite the latest Census figures showing Watsonville is 61 percent Latino, only 31.4 percent of the city's commissioners are Latinos.

When one considers that only one of the seven-member City Council is Latino — Vice Mayor Oscar Rios — the Latino representation percentage in this South County city drops to 28.5 percent.

Several council members, including Mayor Todd McFarren, expressed surprise that more Latinos aren't participating in the governmental process.

"It's a shame to say that out of 61 percent by official count, we can't come up with more Latinos to serve," McFarren said.

Veteran Councilwoman Betty
Please see SOLUTIONS — A18

Latinos

Continued from Page A1

Watsonville Development Committee, said he is "aggravated" when he hears Latinos complain of being under-represented.

"You never hear the Eastern Indians, Asians, Portuguese or Yugoslavians, to name a few, complaining," Oliver said. "A clear message is in order: No one is picking on the Latino community."

Oliver, who got into a heated debate with Castillo about Latino representation at a recent Development Committee meeting, maintained that it shouldn't matter what color someone is as long as they are informed and dedicated to whatever issues are at hand.

"It's important that you have ability and don't just pick someone based on their race," Oliver said. "But nobody should have to go out on their hands and knees and beg Latinos to participate."

Rex Clark, a former 20-year Watsonville councilman and a member of the Development Committee, agreed that "someone should not be picked just because they're Latino."

"Race or ethnic background should not have all that much to do with it," Clark said. "If someone is good for the job and happens to be Latino, I think that's a plus."

Carlos Rico, a Watsonville market owner and former school board member, doesn't believe in "quotas or tokenism."

"I don't want to be a token," Rico said. "You don't want tokenism. You want people who will work and will contribute. Why should it matter what color you are?"

Castillo and Rios say they support city commissions and committees that reflect the makeup of the community they represent.

"There has to be a conscious effort to get people who reflect the diverse community that we represent," Rios said. "If we don't do that, it's just lip service."

Castillo said that diversity should not be limited to race. "Diversity means farmers, educators, field workers and business people. It's not that every commission should be 61 percent Latino. But, at least, there has to be more outreach and more of an effort made."

When pushed as to what he thought an appropriate percentage of Latinos on city commissions should be, Castillo replied, "Fifty percent would be reasonable."

At the same time, Castillo noted that many local Latinos are recent immigrants, may be here illegally or are in the process of gaining amnesty, and may have problems with English. "They may not have a history of participation in government," he said.

Mayor McFarren and Councilwoman Murphy cited the long hours many Latinos work, taking up the time needed to serve on a commission or committee. Such

appointments usually require two night meetings a month and sometimes more.

"I can't tell you how many people I've asked to serve on different commissions and committees," Murphy said. "They just don't have the time."

McFarren noted, "As time goes by and we get more of a pool of people we can call upon, I think we'll do better."

Merchant Rico feels that as local Latinos become more "Americanized," they'll also begin to participate in government.

"Most Hispanics have religion and family that control their lives," he said. "As their kids become more Americanized, I think eventually you'll see a change."

Norma Ambriz, financial aid director for Cabrillo College, Watsonville resident and a member of the League of United Latin American Citizens, added, "Hispanics are just now starting to come to the point where they are seeing the reality, where they themselves are starting to empower and becoming more knowledgeable about the political arena."

Vice Mayor Rios concluded, "People shouldn't be frightened when we say Watsonville should reflect the community. We're not pushing Anglos to the side. If we make a stronger Latino community base and stronger participation, we're going to make a stronger Watsonville."

Solutions

Continued from Page A1

Murphy added, "I thought it was higher than that. I know at one time, the Personnel Commission had four Latinos and one Anglo."

"It is something we need to work on," McFarren said. "I wish I had some magic solution to solve the problem, but it's a matter of hard work and constant vigilance to go into the community and pull out new Latino leaders."

Still, Latino representation has improved drastically over past years.

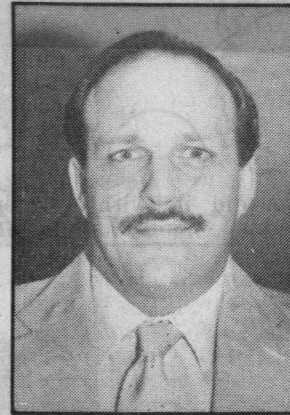
From 1964 to 1987, only 16 Latinos served on any of Watsonville's appointed city commissions. In those 23 years, there were only three Latino planning commissioners — Tony Campos, Luis De La Cruz and Leo Estrada. Today, there are three Latinos on the Planning Commission — Al (Lupe) Alcalá, Mary Corralejo and Nite Gonzalez.

There are currently 12 Latinos in 42 positions on elected or appointed governing bodies. Those bodies include the City Council, Planning Commission, Design Review, Recreation and Parks, Personnel commissions and the Library Board.

The Latino-representation percentage also holds true when taking into consideration seven other city committees, which are more loosely organized than the commissions. Some 33 of 117 committee members, 28.2 percent, are Latino.

Omitted from this count was the Sister City Committee, which is predominantly Japanese-American. The Marinovich Park Community Center Advisory Committee has made the deepest inroads, with eight of its nine members being Latino.

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'It's a matter of hard work and constant vigilance to go into the community and pull out new Latino leaders.'

— Todd McFarren
Watsonville mayor

Rios leads the way among council members in appointing Latinos. All five of his appointments are either Latino or part Latino. McFarren, along with councilmen Lowell Hurst and Paul Milladin, have two Latino appointments, and Councilman Parr Eves has one. Only Councilwoman Betty Murphy and Betty Bobeda have appointed no Latino commissioners.

Bobeda was appointed in April to fill the unexpired term of the late Johnny Kacsmayk. She has not replaced any of the former councilman's commissioners.

Murphy, who has served on the council for 12 years, said she is conscious of Latino representation. She said she specifically went after experience in appointing her commissioners because three new council members were coming on with soon-to-be new appointments.

"I tried to find people who knew the ropes and ended up not having a Latino," Murphy said. "Maybe it looks like I didn't try hard, but it

was a special case for me — we needed experience."

As for increasing Latino representation, Murphy agrees that more Latinos are needed. "But it's easier said than done," she said.

McFarren noted that city officials tend to work with the same people. "You start to wear out the leaders eventually," he said. "After a while, (working with the city) just burns people out."

Vice Mayor Rios also called for more outreach for Latinos.

"There has to be a conscious effort on the part of all council members to start making appointments that reflect the community," he said.

Rios said he is not disappointed in his fellow council members for not appointing more Latinos.

"It's just a process of time," he said. "As we go on, more names will be suggested when openings come up. We're making progress, but we need to do a lot more."

By Keith Muraoka

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