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New force in Watsonville politics

The tenor of the Watsonville city election campaign has been surprisingly low key despite the presence of issues ranging from affordable housing and the economic future of the city to crime in the streets.

However, the May 8 election could mark an important moment in the growth of Mexican-American participation in Watsonville politics. Nearly 1,000 new voters were registered for the election during a recent drive by the Chicano Leadership Council and the South County Social Action Coalition.

Voter turnout is traditionally lower

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than 10 per cent in Watsonville local elections. For the 40 per cent of the population who are Spanish surnamed, the voting falls to a fraction of that turnout.

Before the voter registration drive, less than 30 per cent of the people living in Watsonville were registered to vote there. In the city of Santa Cruz, more than 60 per cent of the population is registered to vote.

Until recent years, Watsonville has been a small, agriculturally-based town run by a stable and conservative power structure. Since 1950, however, the population has doubled to 20,000 and the growth shows no sign of stopping.

This rising crescendo of developing and building, buying and selling, has brought new faces into the power

structure. But there has been no concerted effort by the city to involve the Mexican-American population in projects that would be to their benefit.

However, the recent voter registration drive is only one of the signs of increased political activism among Chicanos. Another group, the South County Social Action Coalition, has been organizing people around issues that directly affect the Chicano community, such as the proposed revitalization of the downtown area.

The issues facing Watsonville are complex, and everyone is in a juggling position trying to get a handle on the myriad fronts of housing, revitalization, growth, economic development, jobs, crime, and the services needed to support a growing city.

The problems are compounded by the very nature of the city's bi-cultural population, whose needs and goals are not often seen eye-to-eye.

One major concern is what shape downtown revitalization will take. The downtown area is presently a mostly Chicano district of homes and businesses. There is a fear the area will be bulldozed over, to be replaced by a neatly trimmed mall which would obliterate any trace of the Chicano culture, not to mention the people's homes and livelihoods.

The downtown area has also borne the brunt of the focus on crime in the city. All of the candidates have called for more police vigilance in that part of town, so that it will be "safe for all citizens."

Housing has also been brought to the forefront during the campaign. Despite record breaking building levels, the housing vacancy rate continues below two per cent. The federal



One of the major issues in the May 8 Watsonville mayor and council races has been whether or not "redevelopment" should proceed in areas like these.

government defines a vacancy rate below five per cent as a housing crisis.

In recent years, Watsonville voters have twice turned down referendum that would have allowed the city to receive federal low income housing monies. But several of the candidates in this campaign have said the crisis has expanded beyond the low-income people and local young people to

middle income families who are unable to find homes.

Few answers have emerged to this range of questions during the campaign. Although candidates have criticized the lack of planning skill in the current council, none has presented an integrated proposal to reorder the city's priorities. ■

Steve Lemken

Candidates crowd May ballot

Three candidates are seeking the mayor's office in the May 8 Watsonville city election.

Bill Johnston owns a local real estate office and is the incumbent mayor. His campaign slogan is "Keep Experience at the Helm." At

department and has criticized the council for "not caring about the citizens at large." Ledesma favors business expansion coupled with care that it does not "destroy the unique and historic character of our town"