

Watsonville, Capitola pick new mayors

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And Capitola's new mayor is: Tony Gualtieri.

His colleagues named him to the city's top post Tuesday night. Councilwoman Stephanie Harlan will serve as vice mayor.

As mayor, Gualtieri, 78, vows to tackle the affordable housing issue.

"Capitola, for its size, has been able to do housing projects," he said, noting the city's role in helping seniors at the Loma Vista Mobile Home Park buy the land, as well as build the Dakota apartment complex for people with special needs at the intersection of Capitola Road and Clares Street, and support the Habitat for Humanity project on 38th Avenue.

"For 10,000 people to do those things over five years, this council supports that and we have the ability to do that."

Gualtieri said he also would like to see the legal wrangling over Jade Street Park with the Soquel Union Elementary School District resolved, as well as the finalization of plans to develop the Rispin Mansion.

This is Gualtieri's second stint as mayor. Elected in 1996, he first served as the city's mayor in 1999. His term as mayor will last one year. His council membership ends in 2004. Because voters approved the term limits initiative on Nov. 5, Gualtieri is barred from running for the same post for two years.

In other action, former Mayor Gayle Ortiz presented Capitola Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Toni Castro with a key to the city as thanks for her work in organizing community events such as the Art and Wine Festival, the Halloween parade and Surfin' Santa.

"Toni is the one who makes everything happen," Ortiz said.

In Watsonville, Vice Mayor Richard De La Paz claimed the city's top spot Tuesday night — which was also his 26th birthday.

Elected to the council in fall 2000 at age 23, De La Paz made history as the youngest person ever to win a seat on the council. Last year, he became the city's youngest vice mayor. Now, he has become the city's youngest mayor.

"I believe I have the ability to bring in the mindset to build on what Betty (former Mayor Bobeda) has left us," De La Paz said.

De La Paz, nominated by Judy Doering-Nielsen, was the only person named for the position. The council unanimously approved the move.

A U.S. Navy veteran, De La Paz helps manage his family's Monterey County real-estate holdings and enjoys spending time with his wife, Michele, 22, daughter Richele, 4, and 3-month-old son.

Doering-Nielsen was nominated for the position of vice mayor by Ramon Gomez. She won the position, but Ana Ventura Phares and newly seated Councilman Antonio Rivas voted against Doering-Nielsen. Neither said why during the meeting.

Doering-Nielsen retired last month from her management position with a San Jose bank and says she can now focus full attention on being the city's vice mayor. De La Paz said her financial knowledge could help lead the city through tough times ahead, as officials brace for future state budget cuts.

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