

Latino chamber reassures community

'Business as usual,' despite debt lawsuit, eviction, confusion over board make-up

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WATSONVILLE — Leaders of the county's Latino Chamber of Commerce sought to reassure the community Thursday that it is "business as usual" despite a series of financial missteps that have resulted in its recent eviction and an unrelated lawsuit over money owed the Seaside Co.

It's been a tumultuous week. Chamber members, business people and even some teachers have expressed concern about the organization's financial dealings.

"I'm very concerned with what's happening," said Elias Alonzo, one of the founders of the chamber six years ago. "I and a few other people risked their career and their standing in the community to organize the Latino chamber. I don't know what the hell's going on. I feel if in fact there is a board, and all this occurred, then the whole board should be thrown out."

Since its inception, the chamber has grown in public stature, drawing state and national figures into the community and serving as a focal point for political activity.

Alonzo's comments are complicated by the strange dialogue about who exactly is leading the chamber through these troubled times.

Several people listed as board members in the October 2003 chamber newsletter say they are not on the board and have not attended meetings for months, some years. Yet chamber leadership insists these people are active members — though not all members of the executive board agree who is presently serving on the board.

At the end of a regularly scheduled luncheon Thursday featuring Assemblyman John Laird as the keynote speaker, chamber board President Roberto Garcia told about 60 people that he, board members and Luis De La Cruz, chamber president and chief executive officer, were embarrassed by the eviction.

Board members, Garcia said, needed to make time to oversee the chamber and

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ensure it fulfills its mission and regains its reputation. He said, however, that while they took full responsibility for the mistakes, there has been no malfeasance.

"The real reason for these financial challenges occurring is that some of our members are not current with their dues," Garcia said.

Seeking to clarify why the chamber failed to secure insurance as required by its lease with its former landlord, El Pajaro Development Corp., Garcia said a member's promised donation of commercial insurance fell through.

Thursday's audience heartily applauded Garcia's comments.

After the meeting, chamber member Jeffrey Solinas, a physician in Watsonville, said he was "surprised" and "chagrined" to read of the chamber's financial troubles, but said he thought it was an oversight. He said he didn't realize that he was behind in his annual dues until he asked De La Cruz moments before. When he found out, he wrote a check for \$125.

Garcia declined to say how much the chamber was owed. It has cash in the bank and all minutes of the organization are open to the public, he said. Records have been unavailable because the chamber just moved and files are in boxes at the new office, at Suite 314 at 420 Main St. in Watsonville.

"Like most nonprofit organizations, but especially chambers of commerce, we have had to rely on membership dues, donations, sponsorships and volunteerism in

order for us to inform, educate and engage the business community at large," he said. "Few organizations have done so much with so little resources."

Garcia said the chamber's full story has not been represented in the press and has been spun negatively.

He went on to say the poor economy created administrative challenges "that far exceed a sole reliance on part-time employees and volunteers to consistently handle without some mistakes being made."

Garcia declined to discuss a \$10,000 civil suit filed Sept. 25 by the Santa Cruz Seaside Co. for the chamber's alleged failure to pay for use of the Cocoanut Grove for an October 2001 dinner.

According to the suit, filed in Superior Court, the chamber "repeatedly provided assurances of payment."

Garcia also dismissed allegations by several Pajaro Valley Unified School District teachers, who said promised scholarships went unpaid for more than a year.

Teacher Elaine Legorreta said her niece twice tried to cash her scholarship check last year, only to find the bank account was closed. Garcia said it was a mistake, and that the student was paid when she returned from college.

Teacher Delia Mendez said another student didn't receive her scholarship in 2000.

"He (De La Cruz) doesn't represent the community," she said. "I feel embarrassed to have somebody like that."

Victoria Mendoza-Staas, who served as chamber president last year and serves as a member of the

executive board, has said members and sponsors could owe as much as \$25,000.

"We're having an evolutionary spasm as all things that evolve do," said Mendoza-Staas. "We are a very organic chamber. A lot of this has turned into a really hot politically and personally difficult time."

Mentioning City Councilman Richard de la Paz, who had a brush with the law after a bar fight involving a woman, Mendoza-Staas said she wonders if this signifies a trend of negative attacks on prominent local Latinos.

"I find it interesting that this is the second major Latino leader in Watsonville to come under fire in recent months. I find it an interesting coincidence."

"I think there has always traditionally been an undercurrent in the community from the beginning of people not wanting the (Latino) chamber to succeed," she said. "There are certain elements in the community that would love to see us fail. Unfortunately I think that's the nature of politics, and it's a political chamber."

De La Cruz, who helped found the organization six years ago and has served as its director or part-time president and chief executive officer for the past three years, tendered his resignation to the executive board last week, according to Garcia. The executive board rejected it.

After the luncheon, De La Cruz rescinded an earlier offer he had made to open the chamber's financial books to the Sentinel.

But the question of who remains on the board appears to be in dispute among the members themselves.