

Area Latino chamber reaches end of the line

Chamber of Commerce 11/13/03
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WATSONVILLE — The answering machine picking up calls at the Latino Chamber of Commerce of Santa Cruz County may be all that is left of the once prominent organization.

Luis De La Cruz, the chief executive officer, sent an e-mail to several people Monday announcing he was quitting his post, but it's unclear if there was anyone left with the authority to accept the resignation.

"The Latino Chamber of Commerce is simply a name, a series of words," Elias Alonzo, a founder and former member, said Wednesday. "This so-

called chamber of commerce is not incorporated, is not a nonprofit, has no board, held no meetings. They have no financial reports."

Since its inception in 1996, the chamber had grown in public stature, drawing state and national figures into the community and serving as a focal point for political activity. As recently as last month, leading local politicians attended its monthly luncheons.

The chamber began to unravel in September when it lost its lease for nonpayment of rent and failure to secure liability insurance. Since then, allegations have surfaced of bounced

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checks to scholarship winners and at least one business.

Also, the Internal Revenue Service revealed the chamber has never applied for the nonprofit status it had claimed to be operating under.

De La Cruz's resignation comes a week after city police opened an investigation into the chamber's financial affairs and said questions about how city donations were spent as well as De La Cruz's criminal history sparked the probe.

He was convicted of embezzling funds from the Freedom Lions Club in 1993 and sentenced to 90 days in County Jail. The former principal of Calabasas and Salpuedes elementary schools also was ordered to repay more than \$1,900, and his teaching and education administration credentials were revoked.

District Attorney Bob Lee said Wednesday his office has assigned an investigator to the case at the request of city police.

De La Cruz declined to comment on his resignation Wednesday.

Roberto Garcia, the board chairman, has not returned calls from the Sentinel in recent weeks, and he continued that practice Wednesday.

"Luis just wrote a damn letter," said Alonzo. "We have an appearance that it is a chamber, and he's the CEO and he's simply departing. There's some problems, and the board will select someone else, and he's home free."

Alonzo said the chamber may not have been legitimate since 1998. Even then it hadn't completed paperwork for incorporation.

The group did file incorporation

documents with the state Secretary of State in November 2002. State records show the paperwork is current.

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