

City's new era begins

Voters turn Watsonville politics upside down

By CHELA ZABIN
STAFF WRITER

Nearly half of Watsonville's voters turned out last night to elect a liberal majority to the City Council for the first time in Watsonville's history.

In the closely watched district 1 and 2 races, voters chose a Latino, Oscar Rios, in District 2, but longtime community activist Cruz Gomez was defeated by businessman Paul Milladin in District 1.

A controversial mobile-home rent-control measure, Measure N, also passed, but voters voted "no" on an advisory measure on the utility user's tax.

Elected to the City Council were Rios, regional organizer for the Cannery Workers Organizing Project, District 2; Lowell Hurst, a teacher at Radcliff Adult School, who could safely be called the most liberal of the candidates in District 3; attorney Todd McFarren, who has served as chairman for the local Democratic Party's central committee, District 4; and businessman Parr Eves, who has been involved with liberal and progressive causes for many years, District 5.

Mayor Betty Murphy won in District 6, the only race that pitted two incumbents against each other. While both Murphy and her opponent, Councilman Tony Campos, are conservatives, Murphy leans a bit more to the liberal side.



Oscar Rios was the focus of media attention at City Hall as votes were counted.

In District 1, however, community activist Gomez lost by 37 votes to Milladin, who was once a part-owner of the Richard A. Shaw frozen-food company and who now works there as a consultant.

And in District 7, Robert Chacanaca, whose politics are to the left of center, was soundly defeated by conservative Johnny Kacsmaryk.

Some of the candidates will serve four-year terms; others will serve two-year terms. The length of terms will be determined by lot at a drawing at Tuesday's City

Council meeting. The council will also be sworn in and a mayor elected by the council.

Voter turnout was higher than predicted. Districts 6 and 7 were tied for the highest, with 48.8 percent of registered voters coming out. District 2 was the second highest, with 44.7 percent of registered voters casting ballots.

District 4 had a turnout of 42.6 percent of its voters; District 5 had 38.3 percent; District 3 had 35.5 percent; and District 1 had a turnout of 33.8 percent.

City Clerk Lorraine Washington had been predicting a 30 percent turn out because of the earthquake.

A number of absentee and provisional ballots remain to be counted, but the numbers are too small to make a difference in any of the races.

Measure N, the mobile-home rent-control initiative, passed by 712 votes. Measure M, an advisory vote on the utility tax, was defeated by 1,024 votes.

All of the proposed charter amendments passed.

Paul Milladin said simply, "I'm bushed" when asked to react to his victory.

Despite some of the philosophical differences, Milladin said, "I think the new council is going to work together."

Milladin said his first goals were to "get the tax dollar back in" and to get affordable housing in, including downtown apartments.

Asked to comment on the fact that only one Latino was elected to the council under a district system created in the hopes of greater Latino representation, Milladin said, "I'm a great friend of the Mexican people. I've mixed

with them all my life, I've broken bread with them. I want you to write that down."

As for Rios' election to the council, Milladin said his victory was good: "We need a Latino in there." He later walked over to Rios, gave him a big hug and posed for photographers with him.

Gomez said it was sad that Rios was the only Latino to be elected to the council, adding that maybe Watsonville wasn't quite ready for the change she had hoped for in this election.

But, she said, "the district election is a success to me, because we have a whole new council we never would have had before."

Gomez said she was encouraged by the number of first-time voters her campaign attracted, by the support she received in the north end of her district and by the enthusiasm non-citizens had for her.

Gomez campaign worker Jon Silver attributed the losses to the amount of money Milladin spent on his campaign, "negative campaigning" against Gomez and the earthquake. When workers went back through the district near the end of the campaign, many of the houses of people who had expressed support for Gomez were red-tagged, he said.

Rios, mobbed by reporters and cheering supporters when his victory was announced, said his

victory was "a people's victory." He said that his goal was the "reconstruction of Watsonville" and that his first move would be to find temporary housing for the people at Callaghan Park and in the shelters.

Later, commenting on the fact that only one Latino had been elected to the City Council, Rios said he thought there had been a major effort by conservatives to defeat Latino candidates. He also blamed a "hidden" prejudice for the defeat of Latino candidates.

He attributed his victory to good organization and "relying on the people."

He dismissed Dan Dodge's charges that his campaign workers had registered non-citizens to vote as "sour grapes."

Dodge, standing outside El Frijolito Restaurant, where he and Cruz Gomez were having a party, blamed his defeat on lack of experience, a small staff, a small bank account and last-minute mud-slinging.

He also said the earthquake wreaked major damage in his Lincoln Street neighborhood and many of his supporters didn't come out to vote because of it.

Dodge also said he stands by his campaign workers' accusations of illegal practices in Rios' campaign. The Dodge-Gomez camp has said they plan to challenge Rios' election because of the alleged fraud.

"I'm glad to see Parr Eves and Todd McFarren on the council," Dodge said, adding that they will bring "a voice of sanity" to the city.

Ray Hoffman arrived at City Hall after the votes were counted and had just heard that he'd lost when a reporter approached him. He said he had no comment.

Hurst said he was itching to start working on "building bridges between various groups of people," but as far as change goes, "the change has already happened — the intent is there, the will is there, the people have spoken."

While Hurst and Wildman had been called similar by many on-lookers to the race, Wildman said after the returns came in that while he tried to project a more conservative image, his opponent was better organized, better able to publicize his campaign, better at raising money earlier — and not as conservative.

With a campaign crew of 15 and 1,650 registered voters to reach in an area that had never been politically organized before, Wildman said, "It was an uphill battle all the way, but we gave all we had."

Todd McFarren, who campaigned on a platform of higher fees for home developers and a break on fees to those who develop affordable housing, said his first priority on the new council would be "a major reconstruction of development policy."

He said he thinks the more progressive bent of the council

shows that residents want to take a new direction.

"I hope we'll have a new sort of politics, a politics of persuasion and accommodation and inclusion of people," he said. "It's no longer an insiders' game."

Gwen Carroll described her campaign as "simple," and McFarren said his too relied on simple techniques like knocking on doors to reach the 1,300 registered voters in the district.

When Parr Eves was declared the winner, Luis De La Cruz made his way to his opponent's

side, congratulated him and quickly left the City Hall building. Efforts to reach him for comment later in the evening proved unsuccessful.

Eves, who was standing in a side doorway of the council chambers when his district's final count was announced, credited name recognition for giving him the victory.

"I've been in business 35 years; I know a lot of people," he said, amid hugs from well-wishers. He also stressed his independence as a virtue recognized by all. "I'm my own man. I call it as I see it."

The win didn't surprise him, because "we kind of predicted it," he said, adding, "it's the first time I ever won anything."

The makeup of the new council will play a major role on how he operates as a councilman, Eves explained to people who asked him what positions he planned to take. However, Eves said he was up to the challenge.

"I'm thrilled," he said. "I think Watsonville is ready for a change."

In District 6, Murphy early in the evening predicted a close race with fellow incumbent Tony Campos. Moments after the absentee count showed Murphy leading 54 to 50, she headed for the parking lot and home, anticipating a tight race.

"It looks darn close," she said. "Districting does that."

When she was informed of the win at her home two hours later, Murphy's response was, "Oh, for heaven's sake." She said she had "absolutely no idea" what single factor helped her defeat Campos.

At his party at the Watsonville Elks Lodge, Campos sipped water and expressed surprise at this defeat, which he said wasn't really close.

"I didn't expect it," he said. As he swept a hand toward the more than 60 supporters mingling in the bar, Campos said everyone had tried his best to get him elected.

Campos waxed philosophical in his defeat.

"That's life, you know," he said as he dug his hands into his pockets at the party.

Kacsmaryk, another candidate who learned of his victory at home, was incredulous of the news.



Betty Murphy is the lone incumbent returned to the council.

"Are you kidding?" he asked. "I'm tickled. That's pretty good."

Kacsmaryk said he has some ideas he's eager to put to work and looks forward to beginning his civic duties.

"It's going to be fun," he said. *Staff writers Laramie Trevino and Susanna Heckman also contributed to this report.*



Parr Eves, left, Lowell Hurst, and Hurst's wife, Wendy, congratulate each other.

Kurt Ellison