

Latino Plan for the Future

WHERE CAN A MEMBER OF the Latino community look to receive a loan to start a small business? How does a Latina high school student learn what she needs to do to apply to college? Two weeks ago, the Latino Strategic Planning Collaborative, or LSPC, announced a broad strategic plan with the goal of exploring answers to just such questions.

The recommendations of the plan, Unidos Para Nuestro Futuro/United For Our Future, are based largely on the findings of two communitywide forums which took place in Watsonville and Santa Cruz last fall and are aimed particularly at policy-makers, says LSPC Co-Chair Rafael López.

"[The collaborative] wants to direct these recommendations to everyone in the community who is able to influence the decision-making process," López says. He emphasizes that by policymakers, the LSPC not only means politicians but figures such as school board members who, though not necessarily in the public eye, are critical decision-makers.

The LSPC has, in fact, found education to be one of the greatest factors determining quality of life within the Latino community and concludes that overall, the Santa Cruz County school system is failing to reach a significant portion of the Latino population. As an example, the LSPC cites the statistic that while Latino students comprise 37.1 percent of total county school enrollment, they account for only 20.9 percent of all students enrolled in college prep courses. López feels that these numbers are a result of what he calls "*de facto* tracking."

"When you make assumptions about who is and who isn't 'college material' you see that manifest itself in that you've limited [students'] opportunities," López says.

One of the goals of the LSPC, López says, is to take the recommendations of Unidos Para Nuestro Futuro to local school board members, so that they can better serve Latino students.

Another issue the LSPC found to be critical to the Latino standard of living is increasing and enhancing leadership, both within the

Latino community and among county government offices. The LSPC highlights the fact that Santa Cruz County has only four elected Latino city council members, has never had a Latino Assembly member and has not elected a Latino to the Board of Supervisors since the 1800s. In order to increase the number of Latino leaders, the LSPC aims to create new avenues for leadership in all areas of the community.

The next step of the Unidos Para Nuestro Futuro plan is for members of the LSPC to divide into focus groups and decide the logistics of carrying out the plan's recommendations. For such action to be successful, López says, community leaders need to realize that the problems that the plan addresses not only affect Latinos but are critical to the quality of life community-wide.

"These issues go far beyond the Latino community," López says. "This plan is a guideline, a map to improving all of Santa Cruz County."

— Andria Strickley

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