

Watsonville mayor steps aside

mayors

66-03

Alleged assault on woman prompts de la Paz to hand off duties

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WATSONVILLE — Mayor Richard de la Paz announced Thursday he will temporarily relinquish the mayor's gavel while deputies look into an allegation that he struck a woman in a local bar last week.

De la Paz wrote a letter apologizing to fellow council members and Watsonville residents Thursday. The vice mayor will take over as mayor today.

"I take these issues very seriously and look forward to the outcome of the investigation so that the

truth will come out," he wrote.

"... After much thought, I have decided that it would be in the best interest of the city for me to suspend all my mayoral duties and temporarily yield the office of mayor to Mayor Pro Tempore Judy Doering-Nielsen until the sheriff's investigation is complete and this matter is resolved."

De la Paz said he "deeply regrets this unfortunate incident" and needs to devote time to resolving it.

De la Paz did not return numerous phone messages left Thursday by the Sentinel.

A meeting that had been scheduled this evening to discuss the matter was called off after his

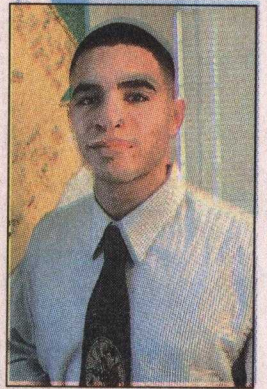
announcement, City Clerk Lorraine Washington said.

De la Paz will continue serving on the council, but will not conduct meetings or represent the city at community events.

"Those are the main (mayoral duties)," she said.

The council will meet Tuesday, but the issue is not on the agenda, she said. Council meetings, at City Hall, have public comment periods at 6:30 p.m.

At the request of Watsonville Police Chief Ter-



See **BRAWL** on **BACK PAGE**

Mayor Richard de la Paz

Brawl

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ry Medina, the Sheriff's Office launched an investigation Wednesday into allegations by a 21-year-old Watsonville man that de la Paz drank too much at the Villager bar on East Lake Avenue, and hit a woman when she refused his advances.

Watsonville police are negotiating a contract with the council and it would be a conflict for them to investigate the allegations, Medina said.

Sheriff's Lt. Terry Parker said Thursday his team had interviewed seven people, and hoped to finish with about four others today.

Two or three women were interviewed, he said, and de la Paz will be interviewed today.

"It's going well," Parker said.

The alleged assault occurred the night of May 28, according to an e-mail sent to some council members June 30 by Chris Lauesen, one of the alleged victims.

Lauesen said an inebriated de la Paz harassed two women throughout the night at the bar and struck one of them when she refused his advances.

De la Paz, 26, who also said he is a victim, declined to discuss details Wednesday, citing the investigation. But he denied striking the unidentified woman.

"I didn't touch her," he said.

De la Paz said he was at the bar with a cousin and a friend when a verbal confrontation occurred. He would not say what sparked it.

He said he was assaulted by the woman and Lauesen, and "got punched."

Both men claim to have been jumped by a group of men.

De la Paz said the woman scratched him and that four to six men helped Lauesen attack him, according to a news report.

Lauesen says the mayor returned to the tavern with two carloads of friends and jumped him, punching him several times.

He said the mayor asked him, "Remember me, punk?" before the first punch.

Lauesen said a police officer came to the bar and broke up the fight. The officer, who was not identified, filed no report and has been on vacation in San Diego.

Parker said the officer had not been interviewed, but might be.

De la Paz said he did not report the incident to police that night. Chief Medina said de la Paz told him about the altercation the next day.

However, at some point during the night, police responded to a 911 call to the de la Paz residence.

Vice Mayor Doering-Nielsen said she and the council support de la Paz in "a very difficult time for all of us." His stepping aside will allow the council to focus on city issues and not this "private matter."

"I think he used very poor judgment," she said. "But I feel for him. He's apologized, and he knows what he did was inappropriate."

"I hope it gets over quickly, and we can get back to him taking over leadership of mayor. I think he's a very talented young man."

The City Council elects a mayor from its ranks and can remove the mayor at will. Whether de la Paz will be allowed to resume the post without council approval is unclear.

The council cannot oust fellow members from the board; only voters can do that.

De la Paz' one-year appointment as mayor ends in November. His council term expires in November of next year.

De la Paz has been a rising star in area politics. After serving more than four years in the Navy, he returned to his hometown in 2000 and that year was elected to the city's 2nd District council seat, winning it at age 23. He scored something of an upset against an opponent who was backed by five council members and the Pajaro Valley Democratic Party.

During the campaign, he admitted he had been arrested at age 18 for petty theft.

He is married and is a father, and his parents and extended family live in Watsonville.

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