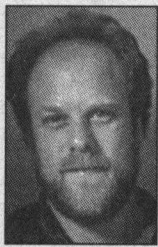


Santa Cruz mayor is asked to resign

Latino councilman takes exception to comments

BY KEN MCLAUGHLIN
Mercury News



Sugar

In a move rare even in the wacky, tumultuous world of Santa Cruz politics, the city's lone Latino council member is urging the mayor to quit for allegedly saying residents of a poor Latino neighborhood "live like pigs."

"Had I made the same remarks towards people of your ethnic background, you would demand no less from me," Michael Hernandez, 47, a Mexican-American plumber, said at a council meeting Tuesday night.

Mayor Keith Sugar, who is white, initially reacted to Hernandez's comments with stunned silence. But

he later denied making the remark and said he had profusely apologized for any misunderstanding about earlier comments he made regarding neighborhood opposition to a proposed low-income housing project in Beach Flats.

"These are scary times if someone's entire reputation can be smeared simply by these sorts of untrue allegations," Sugar, a 39-year-old land-use attorney, said Wednesday. "It's almost Kafkaesque. He pulled some of that stuff out of thin air."

Hernandez on Tuesday night had stepped down from the council dais
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Santa Cruz councilman asks mayor to quit over comments

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to the podium normally used for public comment. He chastised Sugar for his "irresponsible and insolent statements" and told him to resign and let Councilman Tim Fitzmaurice, "a man of high integrity and honor," assume the mayor's post.

Hernandez said Wednesday that Sugar had made the "pigs" remark at a meeting at a private residence two weeks ago attended by the two council members and activists concerned that low-income residents would lose their affordable housing.

Disputed statement

"His statement to me was that if you want to live like pigs, you should go back to Mexico," Hernandez said.

"I would absolutely be incapable of such a statement," replied Sugar, who added that he had no intention of quitting.

He accused Hernandez, a political opponent who is up for re-election in November, of trying to use the incident to his advantage.

"In my view he's engaging in the most venal kind of politics," Sugar said. "He'll do anything, but it will backfire."

Hernandez himself acknowledged that possibility in his prepared statement.

"Some people will think that what I am about to say is political suicide, but silence will amount to no less than political genocide," said Hernandez, who lives in the Lower Ocean neighborhood.

Hernandez said he had moved his family to Santa Cruz because he felt that Santa Cruz was a good place to

raise their biracial children — "a place where their diversity would be celebrated and respected."

"This is not about some ill-chosen words but my fear is that it propagates a mindset of systematically dismissing those disenfranchised and less fortunate," he said. "I cannot sit silently and accept this manner of leadership."

Out of seven council members, Hernandez is the only member who isn't white. About 80 percent of the city of Santa Cruz is white. The rising Latino population is estimated to be about 15 percent.

It was unclear whether Hernandez's distress was shared by large numbers of Latinos in Santa Cruz. Political ethnic tension in Surf City is rare. Most of the battles involve oft-times vicious attacks between two groups who both call themselves "progressives."

More moderate progressives like Mike Rotkin (a self-styled "socialist-feminist"), Cynthia Mathews (a Planned Parenthood executive) and Hernandez are sometimes deemed "conservatives," even though they're all Democrats and liberals.

In 1998, Sugar and two other council members — Fitzmaurice and Chris Krohn — were swept into office, joining Katherine Beiers in a super-liberal voting bloc.

Councilman's comments

On Tuesday night, Hernandez told Sugar: "At a time when the Latino community is most in need of our help and compassion, you have created another level of meanness and hate. Your reckless and lethal shot from the hip has struck deep into the soul of a very needy and troubled community."

The mayor, however, said

Wednesday that he had "successfully worked with Latinos for years," fighting a controversial proposal to create an additional school district in Aptos that would make the Pajaro Valley School District overwhelmingly Latino.

"I also fought with them to preserve agricultural land in the Pajaro Valley and represent many Latino clients pro bono."

May 31 meeting

The controversy that boiled over Tuesday night began simmering after a May 31 meeting of the Santa Cruz Action Network, an influential political group that pushes liberal causes.

In discussing a proposal for an affordable housing project on a Leibrandt Avenue site now occupied by run-down apartments, Sugar said such conditions may be "acceptable in Mexico" but not in Santa Cruz.

"If you want to go back to Mexico and live like that, fine," Sugar added.

On Wednesday, Sugar didn't deny making the May 31 remarks but said they were "taken out of context." He said he was responding to the granddaughter of an apartment building owner who had said that Mexicans "like to live packed in."

What he meant to say, "and most everyone understood what I was saying," is that "it's not OK to live in substandard, overcrowded conditions in Mexico, here or anywhere else."

"I have nothing but respect for the people who live down there," Sugar said.

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