

Latino chamber forgery investigated

Signature of long-departed board member found on checks

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WATSONVILLE — Police are looking into allegations of forged signatures on at least two checks drawn on the bank account of the Latino Chamber of Commerce of Santa Cruz County.

Martin Reyna, a former president of the Latino chamber and current vice chair of the California Hispanic Chambers of Commerce, said he did not sign the two checks that appear to carry his signature.

Police Capt. Kim Austin said it's too early to evaluate the significance of the signatures on checks written to the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce.

Police have requested the checks from the Pajaro Valley chamber, she said, as well as others from additional individuals or groups. Investigators will be look-

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MARTIN REYNA, FORMER
CHAMBER BOARD MEMBER

ing at bank records, too.

"We have so many documents to gather before we can make a determination about what exactly has happened," Austin said.

The two checks were written in September and October, payable to the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce. The first, for \$17, was to cover the cost of a luncheon, but

it bounced, according to Dave Bolick, president and chief executive officer of the Pajaro Valley chamber. The second was written for \$22 to cover the original check and penalty fees.

They both appeared to carry the signatures of Roberto Garcia and Reyna, Bolick said.

Some organizations require two signatures on checks. For example, at the Pajaro Valley chamber, Bolick and any member of the executive committee can sign checks.

Reyna said he hasn't been active in the group for about four years, and denied signing any checks in recent years.

Garcia, who Reyna said has resigned as chamber board president, did not return phone calls Thursday.

Reyna said Luis De La Cruz,

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who resigned Monday from his post as the chamber's chief executive, should have removed Reyna's name from bank signature cards after he stepped down as board president in 1998, and added the new president's name.

"That never took place," Reyna said. "I've been finding out a lot of stuff in the last two weeks (about chamber operations) that are really shocking and frustrating and very disappointing. A lot of us trusted Luis (De La Cruz) and we've been let down big time."

De La Cruz on Thursday referred questions to Garcia.

Garcia, an outreach coordinator for UC Santa Cruz and a member of the city Planning Commission, has served on the Latino chamber board for five years, according to former members.

The police opened an investigation into the possibility of fraud or embezzlement in connection with the finances of the Latino chamber last week in the face of allegations about financial mismanagement and questions about how city donations to the group were spent.

Austin said she understands the community wants police "to put it to rest, to prove it true or prove it

false" so it can move on. But she said this type of investigation takes time.

Jose Gamboa was board president for nine months in 2000, but said he resigned over issues related to administration and direction. Financial records and membership lists, for example, didn't seem to be current, he said.

"I don't think we had our house in order," Gamboa said. "We were spending too much time on politics, and not so much on the mission of the chamber, which is to help small businesses."

Still, Gamboa said, the chamber was a "tremendous concept" that had its successes — for example its advocacy of the public high school under construction on Harkins Slough Road.

Some in the community are talking about the future of the chamber, but say the investigation needs to run its course before anything can be decided.

For Bolick, who reflected on the impact of the Latino chamber publicity on his own 80-year-old organization, the issues can't be resolved too soon.

"The word chamber is out there in a negative light," he said. "In the back of people's minds, they're wondering what about the chamber I belong to."

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