

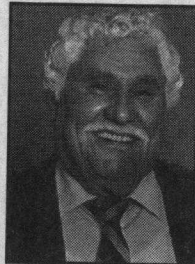
Landowners admit providing cash

Watsonville - Annexation

Latinos were paid to attend public hearing

By **BOB LINNEMAN**
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — A group of landowners in the Riverside Drive area who hope to have their land annexed into the city said they funded Elias Alonzo — the man



Elias Alonzo was hired to do public relations for local landowners.

who admitted paying a group of Latinos to attend last week's public hearing on the issue.

In a letter to the Local Agency

Formation Commission, three landowners said Alonzo was hired to do public relations and outreach in the Latino community — to gain Latino support for annexation. Landowners Rich Kelley, Lou Jemison and Bill Burgstrom told LAFCO that funds were provided to Alonzo.

"A limited amount of funds would be provided to very low income individuals, many of whom are unemployed, to make possible their participation in the democratic process," read the landowners' letter to LAFCO.

Jemison, contacted Thursday, would not say how much Alonzo has been paid since he was hired in April. He said the funds had nothing to do with the so-called vouchers reportedly given out at the meeting that could be redeemed at Kmart.

"We weren't at all involved in the vouchers, that was Alonzo's idea," Jemison said. "We hired him to do outreach. What he did with the money was his decision. We did not have any strings attached."

At last Wednesday's LAFCO

hearing, a Latino man approached a newspaper reporter with a coupon, which said it could be redeemed for \$15 at the meeting. He reportedly walked from downtown to Lakeview Middle School to collect.

Alonzo said he and a group of others provided the coupons to increase Latino participation.

"He was going to provide transportation and babysitting," Jemison said of Alonzo's intentions. "Elias came up with this system. In hindsight, it was a bad idea."

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Alonzo did not return phone calls Thursday seeking comment. But in a written statement, he backs up what the landowners said in their letter.

However, he said earlier this week that money came from four Watsonville-area Latino grassroots organizations, and that was the money used to boost attendance at the hearing. No record of the groups he mentioned could be found. He declined to divulge the names of any individuals who con-

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tributed.

"They exist in Elias' mind," City Councilman Dennis Osmer said of the groups.

Osmer had been critical of Alonzo over this "scandal," as he called it. In fact, he demanded the city offer proof that it wasn't involved in the plan.

"We need full disclosure," he said at Tuesday's council meeting. "We need to make a clear statement that we had nothing to do with this. This is really a miserable thing, and we can't stand for it."

City Manager Carlos Palacios said he intends to disclose all city dealings with the landowners to the council.

Hearing that the landowners funded Alonzo, Osmer said it was a good first step. "At least they're starting to exercise some judgment in the matter," Osmer said of the landowners. "At least they figure they can't bluff anymore."

County Supervisor and LAFCO member Mardi Wormhoudt said the payment-for-participation plan won't have any bearing on her decision about adding 219 acres at Riverside Drive and Highway 1, along with other parcels, to Watsonville's sphere of influence — which would pave the way for annexation.

Currently, the public hearing before LAFCO is still open and will be continued Oct. 1. LAFCO is expected to render a verdict at its November meeting.

"We all have points of view," Wormhoudt said. "But it's clear who we represent. To me, Mr. Alonzo always presented himself as a representative of the community of Watsonville. I don't feel he was very straightforward that he was working for the developers."

Wormhoudt said she's never seen anything like this situation. "I've been in public office since 1981, and I've never seen such an abuse of the process," she said. "It won't make a difference to me, the issue is too large and important. And this has nothing to do with the substance of the issue."

Supervisor Ray Belgard, also of LAFCO, feels the payment plan is clouding the real issue: land that will be used to create jobs.

"It has a bad ring to it, but as a LAFCO member it doesn't sway me up or down," Belgard said. "People keep losing sight of the fact that we're trying to work with the city to adopt this into the sphere of influence. The annexation hearing is another issue that will come up later on. I'd like to see us adopt the sphere request, then take the application (to annex) and make our decision."

In his statement, Alonzo said: "Participation in the political process is a relatively easy thing for middle- and upper-income people who have both time and money. It is not so easy, but just as important, that low-income individuals participate in the democratic political process."

Alonzo has been a member of the Sentinel's Board of Contributors since July 1994. He writes an opinion piece monthly for the Commentary page. He wrote in favor of annexation before he was hired by the landowners, and has touched on the issue since.