

Rios joins exclusive club of Latino mayors

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WATSONVILLE — New Watsonville Mayor Oscar Rios is in exclusive company. He is one of only 24 other Latino mayors in U.S. cities with more than 30,000 population.

Rios, 41, a two-year councilman, became Watsonville's first Latino mayor Tuesday night. Watsonville, with a population of 31,099, has never had a Latino mayor in its 123-history, de-

spite having a current 61-percent Latino majority.

Rios' mayorship is deemed significant by national Latino officials, including the National Association of Latino Elected Officials in Washington, D.C., and the Southwest Voter Research Institute in San Antonio, Texas.

Rios said he is "very proud" of representing local Latinos. "A strong Latino community makes a strong Watsonville," he said.

Yet, in an earlier interview, Rios stressed that ethnicity will take a backseat to the overall good of Watsonville.

"Sure, it's important that Latinos be represented proportionately to the local Latino community because having a broader voice is vital," he said. "But we have to work together to support each other. Housing, jobs, pollution, education and youth are all bigger issues than skin color."

Juan Carlos, a research associate

for the Washington, D.C. organization that works to get more Latinos in office, called Rios' mayorship "significant."

"The number of Latino elected officials has not been growing enough to meet the expanding Latino population in the U.S.," Carlos said.

For instance, there are 4,202 Latino elected officials in the country — less than 1 percent of the total of more than 500,000.

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With only 25 Latino mayors in cities with 30,000-plus population, Carlos said, overall there are 268 Latino mayors and vice mayors in cities and municipalities of all sizes. The 4,202 total of Latino elected officials is almost a 5-percent increase over 1990, he added.

Robert Brischetto, executive director of the Southwest Voter Research Institute, maintained that Latinos continue to be "terribly under-represented at all (political office) levels.

"They are most under-represented in local and state legislatures, but the big difference is really between their proportion of the population and representation at any level."

In California, Latinos make up 26 percent of the population, yet hold less than 6 percent of the state's elected offices, according to a survey last year by Fernando Guerra, Chicano studies director at

Loyola Marymount University.

For his part, Rios has worked to increase Latino representation in Watsonville. All five of his appointments on city commissions — Planning, Design Review, Recreation and Parks, Personnel and the Library Board — are either Latino or part Latino. Yet, currently there are only 12 Latinos out of 42 positions on the city's elected or appointed governing bodies, or 31.4 percent.

Rios said Watsonville residents "should be proud we're on the cutting edge for the next century" by having three Latino council members on the seven-member City Council.

"We're an example for the future of the U.S.," Rios said. "The Anglo population should not be afraid of change.

"There's a lot of subconscious fear of the unknown," he said. "It's hard for some people to see through it. They think we're going

to take over."

Rios says he sees himself as a sort of ombudsman for the local Latino community. In his job as a labor organizer for the Cannery Workers Project, he has contact with many Latinos. He says he has worked to help Latinos in a variety of situations — from domestic violence and runaway kids to problems with neighbors. His downtown-residential District 2 is heavily Latino.

Rios has also been criticized by some in the local Latino community because he was born in El Salvador, coming to the U.S. when he was 10.

"Yes, I've heard some Latinos say that I'm not one of them," Rios said. "But Latinos represent all Latin countries. I try to represent all Latinos."

Rios cited continued revitalization of downtown, affordable housing and jobs as important city issues.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel
Tony Campos, Al Alcalá, Betty Bobeda and Oscar Rios are sworn in Tuesday evening.



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel
New Mayor Oscar Rios, right, receives congratulations from former Mayor Todd McFarren.