

# Landowners funded LAFCO vouchers

Watsonville - Annexation  
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WATSONVILLE — Owners of some of the land proposed to be annexed in the Riverside Drive area said they hired Watsonville Latino community activist Elias Alonzo as a consultant to disseminate information in support of the city's annexation proposal.

The landowners also said they

funded \$15-a-head cash vouchers to increase meeting attendance.

In a letter to the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) Sept. 10, owners Rich Kelley of Green Farm, Lou Jemison of MF Farming and Bill Burgstrom of Famco said that "Alonzo has been working with Riverside Drive Annexation Area property owners as a paid public relations consultant" to "educate

and organize the Latino population in Watsonville regarding the Annexation issue."

Alonzo refused to comment on the nature or extent of his involvement, nor how long he had worked as a paid consultant.

Last week, Alonzo said vouchers were distributed to members of the Latino community as an effort to increase attendance at the Sept. 3

LAFCO hearing. The hearing was open to the public to voice their opinions on the city's proposal to include more than 700 acres of land into its sphere of influence, a step toward annexation. The proposed Riverside Drive annexation area totals 219 acres of land.

Alonzo said cash payments of \$15 were given to attendees, which could be used as a compensation for

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gasoline expenses. He also said that some of the vouchers could be used at Kmart to trade in for item purchases, but Kmart Manager Rich Moor denied such a thing took place.

The land owners said "it was understood that a limited amount of funds would be provided to very low-income individuals, many who

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are unemployed, to make possible their participation in the democratic process. It was understood that the (Latinos) needed funds for child care, transportation, or if employed, could not afford to take time off from night jobs to attend the meetings."

They added that providing the money "was not a hidden or secretive effort," and that "vouchers were very visible."

LAFCO Executive Director Pat McCormick, Watsonville Mayor Al Alcalá and other city officials, however, denied having any knowledge of the voucher distribution or where funding came from for such a campaign.

Land owners declined to disclose how much money was given to LAFCO hearing attendees or to Alonzo for his services as a paid consultant.

Owen Lawlor, a partner of Green

Farm, a landholder in the Riverside Drive area, maintained it was his "understanding that people were paid to attend," but that cash compensation did not sway anyone's intention to attend the hearing. "Just because someone got \$15, their motive isn't any less pure," he said.

Earlier this week, Alonzo said the vouchers and the cash compensations were generated by Watsonville Latino support groups, naming four: Hermanos y Hermanas, Viva Watsonville, Los Catolicos and Vecinos Unidos.

However, city officials such as Mayor Alcalá and City Manager Carlos Palacios, community leaders of other Latino groups such as Defensa de Mujeres and Las Hermanas and representatives of the United Way, an organization that produced a community resource directory listing more than 400 organizations, all said they had not heard of the four organizations.

Alonzo refused to comment any further on the organizations, maintaining his determination to protect the membership.

He also refused to comment on how many Latinos were actually paid to attend, nor how much funds were used to give compensation, but said that "LAFCO would love nothing more than to have no one show up at those meetings."

LAFCO member Jim Van Houten declined to comment on the voucher issue, meeting attendance or the landowners' letter, saying impartiality was crucial for LAFCO members. "We're there to be impartial before the vote," he said.

The Riverside Drive annexation land is owned by 11 different owners, including the Kett Ranch owned by the Kett family of Watsonville, Sakata Ranches, Inc., L&W Land, Chevron USA, Watsonville Exchange and the State of California.

Kelley, Jemison and Burgstrom made it clear in the letter they still felt "the annexation continues to be of vital importance to the Watsonville community." Owen Lawlor, a partner with Kelley in Green Farm, said he felt recent discussion about the vouchers has "taken a life of its own" and has "been blown out of proportion."