

Formation of Latino chamber questioned

By **MARIANNE BIASOTTI**
Sentinel staff writer

WATSONVILLE — Since the sudden formation of a Latino Chamber of Commerce was announced earlier this week, some in the local business community are questioning why the needs of Latino businesses can't be served by the existing chamber.

■ **Director
choice
rescinded —
Page A12**

City Councilman Al Alcalá, president of the new countywide group, said the Latino chamber is an important vehicle for business people, giving them greater networking opportunities and access to funds not presently available through the established Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce and others in the county.

But some fear the new organization will racially divide the business community.

"I think it sets the wrong tone for Watsonville — it just segregates people and doesn't bring them together," said Theo Wierdsma, manager of Watsonville's new Gottschalks department store. He and others say Latinos already have a strong voice within the Pajaro Valley chamber, which has an active Hispanic Business Committee.

"Basically I feel that this Latino chamber will have a disintegrating influence on what's going on downtown," he said, referring to the opening of his store and other efforts to draw shoppers back to the city's core.

"The embodiment of this Latino chamber contradicts the need for diversity. It really plays into the hands of those people who didn't feel the need or desire to be inclusive in the first place."

Wierdsma said that while many people feel similarly, critics are reluctant to speak publicly about what is a sensitive issue in a town that's 60 percent Latino.

Longtime business leaders in Watsonville say the Latino Chamber has been in the works since 1987. That's when Councilman Tony Campos helped start the Hispanic Business Committee, a branch of the Pajaro Valley Chamber. Since then, the group has gained momentum as it has sponsored well-attended luncheons and a scholarship program that's given out \$31,000 in the past nine years.

Members of the new Latino chamber,

Please see **LATINO** — BACK PAGE

Latino chamber

Continued from Page A1

expected to reach 100 in number and to include representation from the entire community, will have additional strength as a group with their \$150 annual membership fee, Alcalá said.

Campos, a vice president of the new chamber, said it will work closely with the Pajaro Valley chamber to act as a bridge unifying all segments of the community.

The group should also bring in more revenues to businesses in the county, Alcalá said, by being recognized by the national and state Hispanic Chamber of Commerce organizations.

"Partly, it's status, if you will. We were like an orphan committee, and we didn't have the abilities available to (Latino) chambers," said Tila Guerrero, owner of McDonald's restaurant in Watsonville.

The Pajaro Valley chamber, for example, was recently overlooked when grants were passed out at a national Hispanic Chamber conference in Florida that honored Guerrero for her efforts linking business with education. And large corporations as well reserve special grants to fund Hispanic-based chamber groups.

Alcalá and others don't anticipate taking away from the Pajaro Valley chamber, which includes about 600 members, but believe the new group will reach out to merchants and others who are not presently active in a chamber.

Sedric Cade, president of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce, said he and other members

Director choice rescinded

By **MARIANNE BIASOTTI**
Sentinel staff writer



De La Cruz

WATSONVILLE — A decision by the newly formed Latino Chamber of Commerce to name Watsonville's Luis De La Cruz as its new interim executive director has been questioned by many this week.

Since announcing De La Cruz's position on Monday, the executive committee has decided to rescind that decision because of what they called potential credibility problems.

In 1993, De La Cruz was sentenced to 90 days in County Jail for embezzling funds from the local Lions Club. De La Cruz denied the charges. He couldn't be reached by the Sentinel Friday.

No new executive director will be named, said Al Alcalá, president of the Latino Chamber, because the group doesn't have the money to pay a staff member. Instead, Alcalá said, he and other members of the executive committee — Tony Campos, Martin Reyna, Elias Alonzo, Jesse Molina and Ana Espinoza — will work overtime to get the group started. The Latino Chamber office will be located in Alcalá's insurance office at 540 Main St. in Watsonville.

plan to rally around the new group.

"What the community should really harp on is that this is a diversity issue, not an issue of divisiveness. One of our greatest strengths is diversity, and I don't think there's anything negative about that at all," said Cade, who as one of the few African-Americans in the chamber's history brings his own diversity to the PV chamber.

Cade and Alcalá said they believe many business people will belong to both groups, and will pay the combined \$350 annual member-

ship (including \$200 for Pajaro Valley chamber).

Cade did say he and others were surprised by the sudden creation of the group, which he didn't have enough information on to bring to his board last Friday.

Alcalá said some Pajaro Valley chamber members had suggested earlier that they wait three to five years before forming a Latino chamber.

"Maybe there never would be an appropriate time — there are some people who would never be ready for this," Alcalá said.