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Council recruits Latino commissioners

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In response to concerns that Watsonville's majority Latino population is underrepresented on city commissions, the City Council last night agreed to a more aggressive approach to seeking appointees.

With six positions opening at the

end of the year, the council voted to run larger and additional newspaper advertisements of the openings than is the current practice. The ads will also be run not only in the Register-Pajaronian but in the Santa Cruz Sentinel and El Andar.

In addition, a mailing list will be compiled and circulated every No-

vember to various area nonprofit, Latino and city-funded organizations with information about the openings.

Pedro Castillo, a local Latino activist who voiced his concerns two weeks ago when appointments for the Library Board and the Planning Commission were on the agenda, urged the council to go

even further. He suggested the city not restrict qualified appointees to registered voters in the city, but to allow any qualified, concerned citizens of the city to serve on commissions and boards.

He added that that was already the policy in the city and county of Santa Cruz.

Several councilmembers

thanked Castillo for bringing the issue to the council's attention.

"It's the intent of the council to have as diverse and broad-based commissions and boards as we possibly can," Mayor Lowell Hurst said. "We need to be reminded of that" by "the conscience of the community."

Castillo last night reiterated his

concerns, and said the issues were of access and outreach. He disputed criticism following the Nov. 30 meeting, saying that his call to the city to appoint more people with Spanish surnames "is not reverse racism; this is empowerment."

Councilwoman Betty Bobeda

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said she thought the effort to enlist more Latinos is "kind of a two-way street. Speaking for myself, there are a lot out there that I don't even know who they are."

She told Castillo, "I think it should be done by someone like you, that people's names should be made available to us, with their qualifications, so that we would know who was out there and who was willing to serve."

Councilman Al Alcalá rejected the idea of letting any residents serve, and took some heat for his position.

While he didn't deny that there are Latinos who are qualified to serve, even if he isn't aware of them, he said, "Someone who isn't registered to vote isn't a concerned citizen."

Watsonville residents Yolanda Navarro and Alejandro Chavez took Alcalá to task for his comments. Navarro said Alcalá "doesn't represent Latinos," charging that the councilman in the past had opposed Latino efforts on other issues.

Chavez suggested that Alcalá's position implied that new immigrants who haven't yet been naturalized or registered to vote couldn't possibly be concerned citizens.

A Virginia resident visiting the city who has been researching non-citizen suffrage addressed the council, pointing out that non-citizens in such cities as New York and Chicago are allowed to vote in some elections. She said allowing the vote to non-citizens encourages civic participation and hastens naturalization for immigrants.

Councilman Oscar Rios, who throughout his political career in Watsonville has supported increased involvement by Watsonville's Latino majority population, said, "The central question is, how do you get people to participate in government, especially in communities where the demographics have changed?"

He suggested that underlying that question is "fear of change," and the new question should be, "What is the best form for all the people that are here now (to) be part of this change, to take part in decision-making?"

In response to a question about whether the city charter could be amended to allow residents to serve, city attorney Luis Hernandez said city voters would have to approve the change.

The council voted instead to support Councilman Todd McFarren's recommendation to direct staff to research and report back on the qualifications required for service on boards and commissions in other cities.