

President defends new Latino Chamber

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WATSONVILLE — The newly formed Latino Chamber of Commerce is defending itself against criticism that the organization will be divisive to the community.

Saying some business leaders' concerns about segregation have been "ridiculous" and "overplayed," City Councilman Al Alcalá, president of the new chamber, said the organization will have a positive impact on the community.

"It's a shame people take a negative (approach)" said Alcalá. "What's made our country so powerful is its melting pot of immigrants."

Criticism has stemmed from the fact that Latino business owners are already served by the Hispanic Business Committee of the Pajaro Valley Chamber of Commerce.

But Alcalá said the Hispanic Business Committee has simply outgrown the Pajaro Valley Chamber.

With the formation of their own chamber, he said, Latinos will have more freedom in making decisions, being governed by their own board, and will have financial independence. The Latino chamber will also be eligible to receive more funding, being recognized as a Latino organization.

"I really think this is an issue of diversity," said Sedric Cade, president of the Pajaro Valley Chamber. While the board hasn't met to discuss the issue yet, he said his personal opinion was a positive one.

"I don't think the founders had (division) in mind. They are concerned about issues surrounding the Latino commerce community," Cade said.

He said he understood that Latinos might feel more ownership of an organization that communicated in Spanish and was tailored to their needs.

While he expects there will be some immediate impact on the Pajaro Valley chamber in terms of membership, Cade said he sees opportunities for strategic alliance in the long run.

"Both chambers can benefit from this," he said.

The two chambers will work side by side, said Alcalá, toward economic progress in the Pajaro Valley. Whether the PV chamber continues to offer a Hispanic business committee is up to that board.

The Latino chamber will focus first on drawing Hispanic business owners who have not yet become involved in any chamber, providing consulting and networking services for free.

The basic philosophy, said Alcalá, is to reach out to retailers' needs.

"We feel there is a need that we can fill adequately, without stepping on any toes," he said.

"Criticize it after it has accomplished nothing, but not before it gets started."

The new chamber has tentatively rescinded the appointment of Luis De La Cruz, citing financial reasons. A final decision has yet to be made by the board.