

Ruiz chosen DA



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Kate Canlis talks with new District Attorney Ron Ruiz as Ariadne Symons waits to congratulate him Thursday.

'Outsider' defense lawyer picked over prosecutors

By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**
and **MAY WONG**
Sentinel staff writers

SANTA CRUZ — Ron Ruiz, a career defense attorney, an outsider and a Latino who was targeted by opponents for representing a gang leader, is the new Santa Cruz County district attorney.

"I'm stunned, but I'm happy," a smiling Ruiz said.

Ruiz, 62, was chosen by a majority of county supervisors Thursday afternoon to head the office that includes attorneys who publicly opposed Ruiz's appointment.

He will serve until the March 2000 election — when several of the attorneys under him may well run against him.

In the interim, Ruiz will head an office he said is in a "sorry state." He has vowed

to "stamp out the ugly cancer that has spread throughout the District Attorney's Office and make it a competent, unified office where teamwork rather than divisiveness is a goal."

"I'm going to be in that office tomorrow morning," Ruiz said.

Meanwhile, Kate Canlis, who was acting district attorney and who sought the job, said she intends to resign and may run against Ruiz.

Ruiz was nominated by Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt and picked up the votes of Supervisors Tony Campos and Jeff Almquist.

He was backed by about a dozen Santa



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Ruiz gets a hug from Court Commissioner John Salazar after being sworn in Thursday.

Please see RUIZ — Page A7

Continued from Page A1

Clara County judges and by a parade of Latino activists, who said it was time for the county to have its first Latino district attorney.

Ruiz agreed. "I didn't play that card until (former district attorney and fellow applicant) Peter Chang said he wanted a 'real Mexican' (assistant district attorney) in there," Ruiz said. "How about me? But how about me at the highest level? Is that so shocking?"

"The time is right. This is your opportunity," he told supervisors. "No more slogans."

Ruiz, a Fresno native and the first member of his family to graduate from high school, said he was "raised on the streets like those in Watsonville and Beach Flats."

"I haven't forgotten those streets," he added. "I know how to open the doors on those streets."

Later, Ruiz said he had hoped race would not become an issue, but was overwhelmed by the "absurdness" of candidates saying they would work to get more minority attorneys in the District Attorney's Office.

"How more absurd does it get? I'm sitting right there. I didn't want to play the race card. I didn't think I had to. I hate it," Ruiz said. "I like to have my qualifications stand alone."

Minutes after being voted into office by supervisors, Ruiz was sworn in by Superior Court Judge Heather Morse.

The selection of Ruiz ends one of the most grueling and intensely political chapters in the office's recent history. The competition started when Art Danner was appointed to the bench in December after 20 years as district attorney.

Eight candidates — originally nine — went after Danner's job, including four from within the office. The tone of the race was set by Danner who, moments after he received the judgeship, fired his long-time chief deputy, Jon Hopkins, to make way for Canlis.

Fierce lobbying, jockeying and behind-the-scenes battles for the job ensued.

Of all the candidates, Ruiz was the only pure outsider, who before the process began had hardly walked the halls of the local courthouse. A resident of Santa Cruz, his 34-year legal career has been primarily in Santa Clara County, where he has a criminal defense practice.

His background sparked opposition. Sheriff's deputies questioned whether Ruiz could switch sides of the courtroom to lead the office. Most of the assistant district attorneys said they wanted a career prosecutor to lead them, not a defense attorney with no experience as a prosecutor.

Two gang prosecutors in the District Attorney's Office wrote to

county supervisors saying they felt that appointing Ruiz — who spent four years as the court-appointed attorney representing the kingpin of a powerful prison gang — would "harm the integrity" of the District Attorney's Office and make it harder to gain the trust of victims and witnesses in gang-related crimes.

Ruiz called the prosecutors' allegations "rubbish." On Thursday, however, Ruiz crossed the room to shake hands with one of those opponents, Assistant District Attorney Dennis Wong.

Supervisors also discounted those concerns. While criminal law practice is unique, "it seems to me quite usual that people move back and forth," said Supervisor Wormhoudt.

Wormhoudt said she based her vote for Ruiz on the "critical policy issues that affect criminal justice in Santa Cruz County at this time."

Supervisor Campos said he voted for Ruiz not because he was Latino, but because he was the best.

"Many people have said, both openly and privately, that I was going to choose Ron Ruiz because he was a Mexican," Campos said. "That is not the case. In fact, I looked at every single candidate with a high-powered microscope. I used one that was 20 times the strength of the others to take a look at Ron," Ruiz said. "I do not want him to fail because he has so many people that are behind him waiting to succeed just as he has."

Supervisor Almquist said Ruiz got his vote because of his experience and high recommendations. The office "needs a cultural change in many ways," Almquist said. "It needs healing."

Ruiz acknowledged the concerns of the law-enforcement community and prosecutors. "I will vigorously enforce the law, first and foremost," he told supervisors. "I know there are concerns in that area. I will enforce the law."

The other hopefuls, meanwhile, were evaluating their own options.

Assistant District Attorney Ariadne Symons, who received the vote of Supervisor Walt Symons, said she'll gladly work under Ruiz, but has not ruled out running against him.

And Assistant District Attorney Christine McGuire, who received a vote from Supervisor Jan Beautz, said she's considering all her options, including staying, taking another job or running for district attorney.

Assistant District Attorney Bob Lee says he's going back to work. "My obligation is to support him until the situation deems otherwise," he said of Ruiz.

Hopkins said he may run for district attorney. He might also apply for a job in the office he used to help run. "It depends on what conversations we have," he



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

New District Attorney Ron Ruiz is sworn in by Judge Heather Morse Thursday as county supervisors Walt Symons, Mardi Wormhoudt, Jeff Almquist, Jan Beautz and Tony Campos, from left, look on.

said.

Chang said he hasn't decided what he'll do: "I don't know. If it was some of those other people, I would have seriously considered it, but I have to see how (Ruiz) does. He really fit in my socio-political agenda. He just didn't fit in my personal agenda."

After the appointment, Canlis told Ruiz she intended to resign. "I told him I'd do everything I can to make sure there's an orderly

transition."

She did not know, however, when she would actually leave her post. It will depend, she said, on her next meeting with Ruiz and what he wants.

Canlis joined the Santa Cruz County District Attorney's Office eight years ago and became chief deputy district attorney in 1997. Danner staunchly endorsed her to be his successor.

But Canlis' chances of success

were marred by reports of divisiveness and morale problems in the office; of all the candidates, she was seen as the "status quo" candidate.

Canlis seemed resigned to defeat even during her closing remarks to the board.

She spent half of her allotted three minutes defending one of her deputies, prosecutor Ellen Campos, who handles juvenile crime. Earlier this week, a supervisor contended the District Attorney's Office had been "overfiling" juvenile cases. Canlis called that "misinformation."

Then she simply told the board she was grateful for the opportunity to have participated in the process.

Later, as the supervisors began the nomination process, Canlis sat quietly in the back row of the board chamber — away from the reserved front row for candidates.

She stepped outside as soon as Ruiz won three of the board's five votes. She watched with an aloof expression as Ruiz took the podium for a brief acceptance speech.

Three floors below in the District Attorney's Office, where nearly half the prosecutors signed a petition supporting Canlis, the board's decision was devastating news. A parade of supporters hugged Canlis later in the office as the Board of Supervisors conducted an unannounced, impromptu swearing-in ceremony for Ruiz.

"We feel betrayed," said one staffer who requested anonymity.

"A lot of us feel we've been kicked in the gut."

But prosecutors, Canlis supporters included, said they will continue to do their jobs under Ruiz.

"I work for the people of Santa Cruz County," said Assistant District Attorney Steve Drotter.

Wong, supervisor of the gang prosecution unit, said he was disappointed by the decision. His concerns about Ruiz's prior representation of a prison gang leader remains — that the hard-to-get trust by victims and witnesses in gang-related cases might wane under Ruiz's reign. "But we're all adults," Wong said. "And although there are slight philosophical differences, I trust that Ruiz will staunchly support our struggles for justice."

Canlis, who previously lost a board appointment to be district attorney in Sacramento County, said she's not out of the picture yet. At the moment, she said she would still like to run for district attorney in the March 2000 election.

"I believe I will, but I'm not absolute," she said. "A year is a long time."

District Attorney Ron Ruiz will be the focus of an hour-long interview tonight at 7 on Community Television Channel 72. The host of the special will be Geoffrey Dunn. Joining him will be Sentinel editor Tom Honig, KUSP news editor Rachel Goodman and Metro Santa Cruz news editor John Yewell.