

Defense lawyer named DA

District attorney Supervisors' choice criticized

BY LEE QUARNSTROM
Mercury News Staff Writer

In a move expected by many, Santa Cruz County supervisors Thursday named defense lawyer Ron Ruiz as district attorney.

Ruiz, 62, replaces former District Attorney Art Danner, who was sworn in as a Superior Court judge in December.

Despite some opposition from law enforcement interests and from some lawyers within the district attorney's office, Ruiz received the votes of three supervisors on the first go-round Thursday afternoon. He was supported by supervisors Jeff Almquist, Mardi Wormhoudt and Tony Campos.

Ruiz, who will be sworn in next week, told supervisors before they voted that he wanted to follow through on ideals he and other young people felt during the turbulent times of the 1960s.

"I think I can make our world a better place," he said.

Referring to critics who have

questioned whether a defense lawyer has the experience to run a prosecutor's department, he said: "If my critics mean I don't have the experience that's brought this office to the sorry state it's in, they are right."

Supervisor Walt Symons nominated Assistant District Attorney Ariadne Symons, no relation, to be elevated to the top prosecutor's job. And Supervisor Jan Beautz, noting that the appointee will serve only slightly more than a year before facing challenges in the March 1999 primary election, nominated Assistant District Attorney Christine McGuire.

Chief Deputy District Attorney Kate Canlis, who was Danner's hand-picked successor, was not nominated for the post she has filled on an interim basis since the end of 1998. The other unsuccessful candidates — who were praised but not nominated by supervisors — were Assistant District Attorney Bob Lee, former Santa Cruz Coun-

ty District Attorney Peter Chang, Santa Cruz lawyer Ed Frey and Jon Hopkins, who had shared the chief deputy district attorney's post with Canlis until he was fired by Danner shortly after Danner was named to the bench by outgoing Gov. Pete Wilson.

The appointment came after more than two months of politicking by candidates and their supporters, campaigns that began even before Danner was officially named a judge.

Supervisors held a long hearing Tuesday afternoon and evening to give the eight hopefuls and their supporters time to make their cases, and they listened to the candidates and the public again before voting Thursday afternoon.

Overriding themes during the hearings included discussions of whether it was necessary to appoint an "insider" or an "outsider" to oversee the troubled district attorney's office and whether a defense attorney could serve as chief prosecutor.

A few Canlis supporters, including a few lawyers in the district at-

**Ron Ruiz replaces former
DA Art Danner in Santa
Cruz County.**

torney's office, told supervisors they felt Ruiz was unqualified to serve as a prosecutor because of his work as a defense attorney.

At one point, assistant district attorneys supporting Canlis circulated a letter indicating they feared Ruiz's defense of a prison gang leader could compromise the department's ability to prosecute gang members. That attack backfired, particularly after Ruiz noted he had been appointed by a judge to defend the man.

He told supervisors that he hates drugs, having seen relatives suffer because of narcotics.

"I haven't even inhaled anything," he said. "But I was raised on streets like those in Watsonville and in Beach Flats, and I know how to open the doors on those streets."

Ruiz will be sworn in next week.

8Jmn 2-12-99