

Varied faces of Latino activism



MERCURY NEWS FILE PHOTOGRAPH

Salvador Sandoval of Enfoque Latino has taken a more confrontational stance, here protesting at the new Garfield Charter School.

Growing minority takes political stage

BY JANET RAE-DUPREE
Mercury News Staff Writer

After years of being nearly invisible in San Mateo County's political landscape, Latinos are beginning to flex their political muscle.

While few have been elected to public office — Ruben Barrales in 1992 became the county's first Hispanic supervisor this century — Latinos in the last year have formed new coalitions, staged a successful leadership conference, conducted vocal protests and wedged their way into the political process with unprecedented determination.

"The Latino community is San Mateo County's awakening gi-

ant," said Assemblywoman Jackie Speier, D-Hillsborough. "This is not a flash in the pan but a deliberate long-term effort to develop powerful leaders."

It is high time, too, say the county's Hispanic leaders, who have endured years of discrimination and are weary of seeing Latinos painted as illegal residents, draining the system of scarce jobs and resources.

"There have been a number of injustices perceived," said Fernando Vega, who said he encountered blatant discrimination when he first ran for public office in Redwood City nearly 30 years ago. "It's time we began to respond to some of the gross igno-

rance."

Two factors have helped the county's Hispanic community amplify its political voice: a rapidly growing population and the professional success of second- and third-generation immigrants.

As recently as the 1960 Census, San Mateo County was less than 5 percent Hispanic.

Thirty years later, census takers concluded that nearly 18 percent of the county's 650,000 residents are Hispanic. And state officials project that nearly a quarter of the county's residents will be Hispanic by the year 2000.

While much of the growth comes from new immigration, it is

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Latinos are 'awakening giant' in San Mateo County politics

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the grown children of immigrants who are venturing in greatest numbers into the county's political arena. College-educated and prosperous, they are among the first Latinos to have the time, energy and know-how to work their way into the system.

"Our generation has the ability to get involved in political roles in a way that our parents simply couldn't," explained Barrales, 32. "Our parents were immigrants to this area and their focus had to be on making a living by working hard. They were just getting by, but they were able to send their children to college."

Vega, 69, helped lead the way for later generations when he became one of the first Latinos to run for public office in San Mateo County in the late 1960s, a time when the county's leadership was exclusively white and Hispanic protests centered on agricultural concerns.

Born in Texas to Mexican parents, Vega said he first ran for Redwood City school board after administrators barred his children from advanced math and college-preparatory classes. "They said it was a waste of time because Latinos didn't usually send their kids to college," he said.

He lost the election but was appointed to a seat shortly afterward when another member resigned. He was appointed to the Redwood City Council in 1972.

Although out of public office for nearly two decades, Vega has continued to work with other Hispanic leaders through a group called Latinos for Better Government. The organization encourages new immigrants to become citizens, persuade those who are already citizens to register to vote and get those new voters to the polls.

'To be part of process'

"It has taken all these years to really wake up the community," Vega said, "but I see it finally happening. The message we're carrying is that this is our society, this is our country, we're American and we need to be part of the process."

One reason why San Mateo



County Supervisor Ruben Barrales says, "Our generation has the ability to get involved in political roles."



Nelson Santiago of the Latino Leadership Council says, "Economic power is political power, in many ways."

County's Hispanic population has been slow to speak up is that newer Mexican immigrants hesitate to become citizens, he said, clinging to the hope that they one day would return to their homeland. In the southern areas of the county — Fair Oaks, Redwood City, east Menlo Park and East Palo Alto — hundreds of residents come from one small area in the Mexican state of Michoacán and still feel strong allegiances there.

Only in recent years has the county's Hispanic population begun to span the Latino spectrum, including Salvadorans, Nicaraguans and Guatemalans, said Olivia Martinez, 50, vice president of Cañada College and founder of Hispanos Unidos. And only in the last decade or so have the American-born children of Mexican immigrants begun to find their way into leadership roles.

Martinez, who is fourth-generation Mexican-American, said she felt it necessary to pursue her professional career first in San Francisco and later in San Jose "because I found the environments there compatible with things multicultural and multi-ethnic."

That was not the case in San Mateo County until recently, she said.

"It was very centered on the status quo, the conservative, the cautious," she said. "I don't want to imply any hostility, because that was not the case, but there wasn't the environment of diversity."

Gaining momentum

The change at first was gradual, Martinez said. Hispanos Unidos was created in 1988 to help educate Latino youth about drug and alcohol abuse. At about the same time, Vega's citizenship and voter registration drive began to gain momentum.

"And then the election of Ruben Barrales suddenly made people aware of this whole constituency," she said. "Now there was a voice. Now there was a door open to Latinos at all times."

Unlike the Hispanic protests of 25 years ago that centered on the mistreatment of immigrant farm workers, San Mateo County's new Latino movement focuses instead on economic prosperity.

"I'm interested in owning the vineyard and hiring my own people and having my own wine label rather than yelling and screaming at those who presently own the vineyard," said Nelson Santiago, a co-founder of the county's Latino Leadership Council. "We need to stop this whole victim thing and take responsibility for ourselves."

Santiago, 44, said his political awakening occurred about four years ago in a trash-filled East Palo Alto alley. A mortgage broker and financier, Santiago had driven his Mercedes into the alley to survey the area for a condominium development when a barefoot boy, perhaps 4 years old, stepped into the alley.

"He just looked at me with this kindness, this tremendous curiosity about who I was . . . and it just hit me: I remember being that kid. I remember what it was like to be that poor," Santiago said.

Remembering roots

Shaken, he talked to his mother about the experience. She chastised him.

"You forgot about us, didn't you?" Santiago said his mother asked him in Spanish. "You forgot where you came from, what it's like."

Within a year, Santiago moved from Los Altos to East Palo Alto. After an unsuccessful bid for city council last year, he turned his efforts to helping create the leadership council. Through seminars, mentoring and networking, coun-

cil members hope to find and train San Mateo County's Latino leaders.

"I'm aware that if you want power, you have to take it," Santiago said. "But I believe in civility, in diplomacy. . . . To get the ear of those already in power, we have to be a little more congenial. And that has nothing to do with bowing down to anyone."

The council's first leadership conference in May brought more than 200 people to seminars on politics, education and economics. A \$100 a plate fund-raising dinner last month attracted dozens of officials and dignitaries, including Mexico's ambassador to the United States. A business development conference and job fair scheduled for Oct. 15 will focus on teaching Hispanics how to start or expand their own businesses.

After all, Santiago said, "economic power is political power, in many ways."

Even as its strength becomes apparent, San Mateo County's Latino political movement is having growing pains that sociologists say are characteristic of a community coming into its own.

Enfoque Latino

Supporters of one faction, Enfoque Latino, or Latino Focus, have made themselves known through the sign-waving, slogan-chanting, in-your-face type of protests that were more common in the 1960s.

Focusing primarily on local issues of concern to the county's southeastern Hispanic population, Enfoque Latino has fought to win greater Hispanic control of the new Garfield Charter School in Redwood City and has advocated fighting crime in the area with a sophisticated gunshot location system.

"We've discovered that sometimes it takes a lot of screaming before anyone will listen," said Enfoque Latino founder Salvador Sandoval.

Their methods have made elected officials blanch.

"I'm not easily bullied, and I don't bargain with bullies," said board of supervisors President Tom Huening, who relinquished leadership of Garfield's governing board after several loud Enfoque Latino protests accused him

of being dictatorial and racist. "The sign-waving and yelling may work for them for a while, but it doesn't work in the long run."

To the contrary, said political scientist Fernando Guerra of UCLA Marymount University in Angeles. Guerra said his studies of ethnic political movements show that both the vocal protesters and the quieter diplomats needed for success.

Diplomats or sign-wavers

"The sign-wavers are the community activists who challenge the system, who make people realize that there must be Latino elected and appointed and included in government," Guerra said. "People may not like the way they articulate it or how they pursue it, but they begin to rise, deep down, that the sign-wavers are right."

That's where the community diplomats come in, he said.

"They are able to put up credentials with the credentials that people already in power are comfortable with," Guerra said. "They're the bridge between Hispanic community and the establishment."

It also helps, he said, if there is an organization that draws together the various threads of community.

Members of the Latino Leadership Council say they hope help weave that fabric of community.

For years, groups such as Hispanos Unidos, El Concilio and Latinos for Better Government have conducted citizenship workshops and voter registration drives, health care studies and Hispanic youth programs in San Mateo County.

But this is the first time representatives from each of the groups have met regularly to share information and resources, said Bob Vasquez.

"I don't see us as powerful, see us as doing a job that needs to be done," Vasquez said. "Many Hispanics have been standing on the sidelines, not wanting to get involved, because they don't want to wave signs and march in protest. We're the quiet workers moving ahead without screaming at anyone."