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LAWRENCE

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## Melendez won't run for mayor 2001 candidate supports Reyes

By Russell Contreras, Globe Staff | March 27, 2008

Isabel Melendez, the community activist who came close to becoming the state's first elected Latino mayor when she ran for the Lawrence post in 2001, has announced she won't seek the job next year.

Instead, she said she is throwing her support behind former city councilor Israel Reyes, who recently announced his intention to run for the office.

Melendez's announcement ends speculation that the 70-year-old would make a second run for the city's top municipal spot when Mayor Michael J. Sullivan leaves office because of term limits. For months now, Spanish-language radio stations and local newspapers have mentioned Melendez as a possible candidate.

But Melendez said she believes she can be more effective as head of Voters in Action, a nonprofit group that has been working to register Latino voters.

"I'm very pleased with what I do," she said in a recent interview. "I just felt I needed to make the announcement so people would stop bothering me" about running for mayor.

In 2001, Sullivan, a Republican, garnered 54 percent of the 12,648 ballots cast, outpacing Melendez, a Democrat, by 957 votes.

After the election, Melendez became an ally of Sullivan, even endorsing him for reelection in 2005 over challenger Marcos Devers, a city councilor at the time and a fellow Latino.

Since then, Melendez has been splitting her time between political activity, a radio show, and helping flood and fire victims in the city, where Latinos are the majority.

Melendez said she is supporting Reyes "because he's a friend" and would do "a great job" as mayor. "I've known him for years, and he has my support."

In a release, Reyes stated he was "humbled" by Melendez's support, and named her cochair of his mayoral campaign.

"Isabel has taught me a lot not only about politics, but also about community involvement and the positive impact it can have when people get together for a common cause," Reyes said. "I truly respect the work she has done for the past 40-plus years and know it will have a tremendous, positive impact in my quest to become the next mayor here in Lawrence."

Reyes is the first to publicly say he is seeking the post in 2009.

Others who have said they are considering running include City Councilor Nilka Alvarez-Rodriguez, City Council president Patrick Blanchette, former city councilor Carlos Matos, and high school teacher Pedro Payano.

State Representative William "Willy" Lantigua, a Lawrence Democrat, has said he is contemplating running for mayor but he is locked in a tough reelection fight for his state seat against Devers.

Giovanna Negretti, executive director of ¿Oíste?, a nonprofit that seeks to elect Latino candidates in Massachusetts, said Melendez remains an important community activist and trailblazer in Lawrence, despite her loss seven years ago. In fact, Negretti said, Melendez made history with her run.

"When she ran for office in 2001, it was a historical moment because she came so close," said Negretti. "It let Latino voters know that it was possible" to win.

Because of that legacy, a Melendez nod in any Lawrence race will have an effect, said Negretti. But whether it will push Reyes to victory remains to be seen, because the race is wide open, she said.

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