

LAWRENCE

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## New post met with suspicion Latinos see a bid to weaken mayor

By Russell Contreras, Globe Staff | June 1, 2008

For several election cycles now, Latinos in Lawrence have had their eyes on the mayor's seat, hoping the time would be right for one of their own to take over the helm of the city. With Latinos now comprising the majority of voters in Lawrence, the prize seems within reach in 2009, when Mayor Michael J. Sullivan hits his term limit.

But now comes the rub: Sullivan has proposed creating a city administrator position to help him with the finances and day-to-day operations at City Hall - in effect, shifting some decision-making prerogatives from the mayor's office to an unelected city employee.

Some Latino politicians and local activists are upset. They say Sullivan, who is barred by city charter from seeking another term, is trying to dilute the power of the mayor's office as he heads out the door - and just when a Latino might have the best chance yet at becoming mayor.

"I find it coincidentally suspicious that this idea is coming now," Carlos Matos, a former city councilor and mayoral candidate, said recently of Sullivan's move.

For his part, Sullivan said his proposal has nothing to do with electoral politics or taking power away from the next mayor. Rather, Sullivan said, it comes after an audit by the state and a recommendation that the new position would help with the city's finances.

Matos "is just stirring up emotions" and spouting inaccurate information, Sullivan said. "I think what he's doing is divisive."

Matos has said he is considering running for mayor again in 2009, after coming in third in the 2005 race against Sullivan.

Sullivan said the city administrator would help the mayor with administrative tasks and would still report to the mayor.

The state Department of Revenue issued a report in February recommending that Lawrence create such a position to coordinate city operations, oversee firings and new hires, and manage daily business. These responsibilities are currently handled by the finance director, human resource director, and the city attorney.

The revenue department made the recommendation after conducting the audit of the city's finances at the invitation of Sullivan, and concluded that Lawrence was heading toward an "inevitable fiscal crisis" that could lead to a state takeover of city government.

Sullivan initially put the administrator position in his proposed \$240 million budget but took it out after city councilors signaled they would not support it before they passed the budget. Sullivan says he plans to reintroduce the proposal later this year.

Giovanna Negretti, executive director of ¿Oíste?, a statewide nonprofit aimed at electing Latinos, agreed with Matos and called Sullivan's proposal "very convenient," coming so close to the 2009 mayoral election cycle. She said the city's past administrations are to blame for Lawrence's current fiscal woes and any Latino elected in the future should not have to bear the consequences.

"The city is paying for the incompetence of previous white mayors," said Negretti. "What's going to guarantee that the person who is hired for this [administrator] position is Latino?"

Negretti said Lawrence has had a history of questionable voting practices in city elections. In 2005, ¿Oíste? filed a lawsuit against the city after officials failed to send out a required census survey on time, which knocked mainly Latino voters off the registration rolls before the mayoral election. The two sides later came to a compromise.

Former city councilor and 2009 mayoral candidate Israel Reyes said he does not believe Sullivan's proposal is part of a plan to disenfranchise Latinos before the next city election.

"It's unfortunate that some people will inject race in this process," said Reyes. "I don't think that the Hispanic community being on the cusp of electing our first Hispanic mayor should be a qualifier for creating this position."

Reyes said he finds the idea of a new city administrator position "intriguing," especially if it puts a professional administrator in charge of the city's finances.

About 70 percent of Lawrence's 71,000 residents are Latino, according to the city's latest numbers. More than half of the city's 34,000 registered voters are Latino.

In addition to Reyes and Matos, Lawrence High School teacher Pedro Payano and City Council President Patrick Blanchette are expected to run for mayor in 2009.

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