

As Nevada diversifies, some push back against anti-immigrant rhetoric

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Byline: Ashley Powers

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Body

PAHRUMP, Nev. - Andy Sanchez had just moved to this dusty outpost near Las Vegas when a gust of anti-immigration furor tore the town asunder.

The town board voted in 2006 to make English the official language of Pahrump and bar residents from flying a foreign flag without a U.S. flag near it. When a couple hung Italian and Polish flags in protest, their house got egged.

"I didn't know that kind of racism was here," said Sanchez, 73, although the ordinance was rescinded within a few months. "It broke my heart."

But last month, Sanchez was heartened when a group of residents launched a recall campaign against a county official who sent e-mails that disparaged Latinos. That's when Sanchez, a retired nurse, saw the new politics of Pahrump on display.

The Pahrump Valley Times had obtained e-mails in which Assessor Shirley Matson, a Republican, compared Latinos to "locusts," said pregnant Latinas were carrying "anchor babies" and told the sheriff she was fearful of "Mexican/Latino, non-English speaking" construction workers building a nearby jail.

Matson, who declined interview requests from the Los Angeles Times, said in a letter to the community that "rarely does a day go by that a county resident does not stop in to thank me for speaking out and ask me to hold my ground."

Yet the all-Republican county commission publicly excoriated her. The newspaper demanded her resignation on its front page. Sanchez joined a group of local activists trying to recall her. "As a public official, you cannot spread hatred," he said at a recent signature-gathering event.

Residents say Nye County has always had a small but vocal anti-immigrant crowd. But what has changed in a matter of years is the ferocity with which some residents are pushing back - underscoring a recent demographic trend in Nevada, where new and diverse residents have remade the swing state's complexion and political culture.

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Some of the recent outcry in Pahrump can be attributed to the incendiary nature of Matson's comments, which repelled even supporters of tough border enforcement. "You can't stereotype us because we're 'tea party' people here," said Commissioner Dan Schinhofen. "We can see when things are over the top."

But there is also a tonal shift in Pahrump and elsewhere in Nevada, where the Latino population soared nearly 82 percent in the past decade. In 2000, nearly two-thirds of state residents were white. Now, close to half are minorities.

In many ways, that mirrors what's unfolding nationwide: Latinos accounted for more than half of U.S. population growth since 2000, and capturing their votes is considered crucial in next year's presidential race. Several Republican White House hopefuls have dispensed with their party's harsh anti-immigrant rhetoric, if not its tough border policies.

"It's not just about the growth in Latinos," said Nevada political consultant Andres Ramirez, who has worked on state redistricting. "It's a change in philosophy of how people think."

The party diversity among Nevada's voters is split: Of about 1.3 million voters, 563,000 are Democrats, 460,000 are Republicans, and 360,000 are nonpartisan and minor-party voters.

Nevada elected its first Latino governor last year, a Republican who won much of his support from white voters. Immigrant-bashing, once a reliable rallying cry for the Nevada GOP, now carries electoral risk, as nearly 27 percent of state residents are Latino.

Just ask Sharron Angle, whose bid last year to unseat Democratic Sen. Harry M. Reid was partly derailed by commercials depicting Latinos as menacing thugs - although she did win deep-red Nye County.

Local Democratic Party chairwoman Jan Bearss views the backlash against Matson as a backlash against the Pahrump of old. "A few years ago, I don't think this would have happened."

Nevada's population boom transformed Nye County. In 1990, of the nearly 18,000 people living across its sun-baked valleys, about 7 percent were Latino. But as newcomers rushed to Las Vegas for tourism and construction jobs, thousands of people settled "over the hump" in Pahrump, the county's largest town and the self-proclaimed "Heart of the New Old West."

Now, of the 44,000 people who call Nye home, roughly 14 percent are Latino. And Latinos accounted for about 22 percent of the county's K-12 students in the 2009-10 school year. The growth also rerouted people from more diverse urban areas to a frontier outpost known for legal brothels and feral politics (county Libertarians recently held a Martin Luther King Jr. Day event at a gun range). "The community itself became more diverse in opinion," said political consultant Ramirez.

In Pahrump, the town board passed the English-only ordinance at a meeting where people who spoke against it were booed. Sheriff Tony DeMeo refused to enforce it, but some Latinos said they were afraid to speak Spanish in public. After a few months - and a number of unflattering news reports - the board repealed the ordinance.

The Matson episode has reopened some wounds.

Newly elected Matson has never publicly apologized for her comments. In her letter, she calls her foes "hypocrites" who "think freedom of speech is okay when they exercise it, but a conservative, well, that's altogether different." She has rallied some supporters in town, although their sway will soon be tested.

Stephanie Lopez, a homemaker who moved here from Las Vegas in 2005, is involved in local politics and runs a popular Facebook page, "Positive Pahrump." When the Matson controversy erupted, Lopez's husband, Jose, asked her to intervene. So Lopez, 29, rounded up like-minded neighbors and started the recall drive.

Sanchez, the retired nurse, joined them. When he was a kid in Arizona, some families wouldn't let him play at their homes. As an adult, he lived in Vegas when it was considered the "Mississippi of the West" because of its poor

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treatment of African Americans. When Lopez recently approached him about helping with the recall, he didn't hesitate.

"She made Hispanics stand up and be counted," he said, wearing a T-shirt that said "Adios Matson."

- Los Angeles Times

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