

Latino Who Will Chair Board Is Described as a 'Unique and Needed Voice'

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Body

J. Walter Tejada, an immigrant who moved to the United States from El Salvador when he was 13, has been named chairman of the Arlington County **Board**, which **will** make him the highest ranking **Latino** elected official in Northern Virginia.

Tejada (D), 50, first elected to the **board** in 2003, was chosen by his four fellow **board** members to be chairman, which **will** allow him to set the **board's** agenda, prioritize its spending goals and act as the county's primary spokesman.

"I'm excited and humbled that my colleagues have placed that trust in me," Tejada said yesterday.

"I'm continuing to live the American dream."

Tejada came to prominence in 1999 during the political fight over the destruction of the Arna Valley apartment complex -- a demolition that displaced 3,000 people, many of them immigrants.

He said he feels especially pleased with his new role because Virginia is "a state that has not been that friendly to immigrants."

In the recent elections, for example, some politicians in Prince William County called for a crackdown on illegal immigrants rather than recognizing the contribution they make to the local economy, Tejada said.

"We **need** to be very careful we don't set policies based on whims," he said, adding that he **will** take on the challenge of battling policies that are not "inclusive and caring."

In Arlington, county officials in September rebuked politicians elsewhere for taking measures they called "punitive" toward immigrants and unanimously backed a resolution calling on elected officials to "promote the integration of immigrants."

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Latino activists and elected officials in the Washington region were pleased -- and surprised -- at the news of Tejada's new role on the **board**.

"It's fantastic," said Maryland Del. Ana Sol Gutierrez (D-Montgomery.)

"He is definitely a **unique** and **needed voice** in Virginia. He's been such a leader in representing the **needs** of Latinos."

Gutierrez said Tejada has played a key role regionally by raising issues of concern to Latinos at the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments. She said he has spearheaded discussions of immigration, day laborers and gangs.

"He has brought the governments together," she said. "He's been spectacular at that."

Tejada's reach has been regional and national, not just local, said William Ramos, director of the Washington chapter of the National Association of **Latino** Elected and Appointed Officials.

"He's brought forth a reasoned approach to immigration reform," Ramos said.

Arlington **Board** member Barbara A. Favola (D), who **chaired** the **board** in 2000 and 2004, said that Tejada **will** bring "a very special perspective" to the chairmanship because of his immigrant experience.

"He has a personal commitment to people who want to help themselves but who may **need** a helping hand," said Favola, who **will** serve as the **board's** vice **chair**. "That's been his passion."

Tejada, a former aide to U.S. Rep. James P. Moran Jr. (D-Va.), **will** unveil his goals for next year at a meeting Jan. 1. A longtime advocate of affordable housing, he is expected to make that issue a priority for Arlington in 2008.

Tejada is married to a teacher, Robin Tejada, and lives in the Dominion Hills area of Arlington.

Graphic

IMAGE; By Pamela Constable -- The Washington Post; J. Walter Tejada, who emigrated from El Salvador when he was 13, said he **will** try to ensure that Arlington County policies are "inclusive and caring."

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