

# From the republican

## Latinos key to Springfield's future

Saturday, October 15, 2005

By AZELL MURPHY CAVAAN  
acavaan@repub.com

Take a short drive through downtown Springfield and you can pick up the latest tunes in Latin reggae, feast on authentic arroz y gandules (rice and peas) and shop for the hottest Brazilian-style fashions on the market today.

The burgeoning industry marketed for and by Latinos is proof positive that the face of Springfield is changing. Nearly 100 percent white at the turn of the century, Hampden County is now home to about 70,000 Latinos, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The majority, about 59,000, are Puerto Ricans, followed by Mexicans, around 1,000; and Cubans, about 450.

As of the 2000 census, non-Hispanic whites were the minority population in Springfield. Some longtime Springfield residents say in private and on Web forums such as MassLive that white flight coincides with the city's fall in fortunes to a point where a state-appointed board now runs its finances.

Figures released last August by the U.S. Census Bureau showed that Hampden County is the second most impoverished county in New England, and Springfield has been listed as the third poorest city statewide. But others say a city's diversity can be its strength.

The number of Latinos in Springfield increased more than 50 percent from 1990 to 2000 when 27.2 percent of the city's population identified themselves as Hispanic. The number of non-Hispanic black residents rose slightly from 18.1 percent in 1990 to 19.6 percent in 2000 while the number of white non-Hispanics dipped to 49 percent.

Springfield is not alone in its metamorphosis. The Latino population nationwide increased from 27 million to 40 million between 1990 and 2000, including Puerto Ricans. Statewide, this population grew by 49.1 percent, from 290,000 to about 430,000 during the same time period, the bureau reports. Business experts across the nation agree that changing demographics can translate into economic gains for savvy cities eager to embrace their new residents.

"There's been a dramatic increase in Latin-owned businesses here and it's very positive because they bring tax dollars, employ city residents and create wealth

within their own community," said Russell F. Denver, president of the Affiliated Chambers of Commerce of Greater Springfield.

While numbers are hard to come by, restaurants, beauty salons, Web site design companies, florists, music shops and clothing boutiques have been among the Latino-owned businesses to crop up throughout the city in recent years, according to Denver.

There are plenty of examples of cities that have stood where Springfield now stands and blazed a trail that helped Latinos integrate into the community and their businesses to not only survive, but thrive.

Ramon Ojeda, president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Metro Orlando, said Hispanics have played an important role in that city's economic boom. Hispanics own and operate about 130 private businesses in Orlando, a city that has one of the fastest-growing Hispanic populations nationwide, many of them Cuban-American.

A recent study by Fishkind and Associates, a Florida-based economic consulting firm, found that Hispanic communities in Central Florida contribute more than \$6.9 billion to the region.

By 2007, that number is expected to increase to more than \$8.2 billion, according to the study.

It's a wave that most cities would like to ride. But the key, according to Ojeda, is organization.

"Efforts that include tangible activities and training and partnerships are crucial for providing guidance for new business owners," he said.

In Springfield, where Latinos have the highest dropout rates and lowest test scores, a key may also be education. Step Up Springfield, a campaign for proficiency for all Springfield students, has made a priority of reaching out to Hispanic parents with the goal of raising test scores and getting more Latino kids into college.

"It's absolutely critical because education affects the economic development of our region," said Cheryl Gorski, campaign manager for Step Up Springfield.

"We're getting the message out there that their kids are just as capable as anybody else."

For any city, the first step in the right direction is the development of support networks for new business owners, including the formation of an ethnic-based Chamber of Commerce.

Carlos Gonzalez, president of the Springfield-based Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce, said the increase in Latino-owned businesses in downtown Springfield is proof that the city is a mini-Miami in the making.

"We're no different than Miami was years ago when Latino communities came and never left," he said. "Today, those communities are greatly responsible for the economic boom in Miami and Orlando."

Hector A. Bauza, president of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Western Massachusetts, said his Holyoke-based organization has helped dozens of entrepreneurs find their footing and is actively campaigning for better tax incentives for new business owners in and around Springfield.

The affordability of housing is among the chief draws for Latinos who come to Western Massachusetts.

Not all of them come to the city from Puerto Rico or foreign countries. In recent years, many Latinos have left Boston and New York to resettle here.

"These folks already have business backgrounds and are coming to advance that here in Springfield," Gonzalez said.

Bauza said he also urges members of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce to network with the Affiliated Chambers of Commerce of Greater Springfield.

For Isabel Pelot, the connection with the business community meant the difference between a dream deferred and a dream realized when she opened the Latin Flava Cafe, a coffee shop at 1677 Main St.

"I got help from programs there that taught me about business plans, management, cash flow, everything," said Pelot.

Pelot's business venture was three years in the making. Since it opened in February, the cafe represents all that is good about local business ownership.

Patrons stop in for beverages or order meals from the lunch and dinner menu. There is a cozy space for reading books, and customers are encouraged to leave their business cards on what Pelot calls the "referral table" for a little bit of free advertising.

Story time is held for youngsters under the age of 12 weekly, while more mature customers can spend an evening listening to live Latin jazz or poetry.

"I try to give back to the community," said Pelot, a Puerto Rican who has lived in Springfield for 22 years.

Pelot said her cafe has had its share of economic ups and downs. But if she succeeds, it means more money for the local economy.

Most of the ingredients Pelot uses in her food items come from local farmers, and she purchases the all-natural soft drinks she sells from the Paper City Brewery in Holyoke. Her cafe is adorned with the work of local artist Awilda Oxios.

But the benefits of supporting ethnic-based businesses are not only measured in dollars and cents. Diverse cities across the nation have touted the positive social impact which locally owned businesses have on the community.

Yasmin Cortes, owner of Appliance Plus at 609 Main St., is quick to credit the Affiliated Chambers of Commerce of Greater Springfield with helping to sow the seeds of her success.

Her community and the city have benefited from her accomplishments.

"I have good relations with city officials as a business person and that helps in the work I do as a neighborhood advocate," said Cortes, who became a fire commissioner last year.

Cortes and her family are committed members of the Lower Liberty Heights Action Team. Several nights a week, Cortes looks for ways to increase affordable housing opportunities in the neighborhood. She credits her group with chasing the prostitutes and drug dealers off the street corners and out of the parks. Her family frequently contributes to local police and fire associations, Cortes said. And they are known to quietly provide assistance to members of their communities who need a financial boost. All that is on top of the taxes Cortes pays the city for operating a business here.

"We give to the city and the city gives to us," said Cortes, who took over the used appliance business from her brother-in-law in 1998.

"Springfield is a good place to live, and I feel positive about my contributions," she said.

Support from the city can only enhance those contributions, and in many cases, the city is quick to lend a helping hand to ethnic-based businesses that have already established themselves as assets.

The City Council, for example, recently went against a Planning Department recommendation and approved a special permit for a drive-up window at Juncos and Cayey Restaurant at 120-126 Walnut St.

Planners had objected to a drive-up window in such a "very pedestrian corridor," but restaurant owner Miguel A. Calderon had earned the respect of his neighbors over his 20-year restaurant career and their support of him pushed the City Council to vote in his favor.

"Hard work keeps me in business," said Calderon, who arrives at his restaurant by 5 a.m. on most days. "I look to give the best to my customers and look out for the neighborhood which I am in."

As their numbers continue to climb, the contributions Hispanics make to the community increase, too. The numbers in Springfield may not compare with

those of Orlando or other metropolitan areas, but it is clear that they are on the upswing here, too.

Maria D. Acuna has been a real estate agent in the city for eight years. When she started the Maria Acuna Real Estate agency, her clientele list did not include the names of many Latino families. These days, however, Latinos represent Acuna's fastest growing segment of first-time home-buyers, she said.

"They are buying everywhere north to south to east and west," said Acuna. "It's exciting because it's good for the city."

Indeed, the city's big- and medium-size employers have contributed to the financial security of many Latino families. But sometimes it is small-business owners like Noemi Souza of Honey Bunnies Fashions that push dual wage-earning families over that economic edge.

Souza employs three people in her Chestnut Street boutique, which features Brazilian and exotic fashions. The store has grown from seven square feet to 1,600 square feet since Souza opened her doors five years ago. The former professional dancer said the Affiliated Chambers of Commerce of Greater Springfield helped her lay the foundation that has created her success.

"I think there is a real need for businesses like mine," said Souza, who designs and sews most of the items she sells. "There is a growing niche out there and it needs to be filled."