

Business

CATHY TAYLOR

Californian may be next Bush aide

Is President Bush aiming to replace Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher with a Hispanic from California's business community?

Speculation about the possibility rolled through Capitol Hill last week after the rumor was made public by columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak. To many, the concept was well received. "I think the president would be wise to give high consideration to a Californian, a Hispanic," said US Rep. Esteban Torres, D-North Carolina.

"This would be tremendous," said Alfredo Amezcua, head of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Orange County.

How much truth is there in the rumor? Mosbacher is expected to announce soon that he will resign as commerce secretary to manage day-to-day operations of Bush's re-election campaign, but that is not guaranteed. And even if he does resign, there are other candidates for the spot, such as Deputy Secretary Rockwell Schnabel.

However, I've confirmed that the administration is indeed drumming up a candidate list here for a key position, possibly commerce secretary.

A source familiar with the process told me he was asked late last month by the White House for Hispanic names to be considered "for a high position in the administration." The position "required business and trade expertise."

Although the directive was not limited to California, "I have to say, when you call on a Californian for a suggestion, you are going to get a Californian," he said.

"I will be happy to provide them with a couple of names, but I have not settled on the names yet," he said.

Several candidates spring to the minds of local Hispanic leaders: Ron Cedillos, president of Cedillos Testing Co. in Long Beach; Gaddi Vasquez, Orange County supervisor; and Frank Cruz, president of the Latino Museum of History, Art and Culture in Los Angeles.

Cedillos, 41, said he could not confirm or deny if he has been sounded out about a post. He did, however, attend "a small meeting with (White House chief of staff) John Sununu" and other California executives three weeks ago. "It was a general business discussion," he said.

Cedillos, who lives in Huntington Beach, earned his Republican Party stripes by raising millions for Gov. Pete Wilson and others. And he drew statewide notice when he started Californians for Aerospace Leadership earlier this year.

Cruz, who lives in Fountain Valley, also said he could not confirm or deny if he had been contacted. Cruz, 52, taught history at California State University, Long Beach, worked as a television newsman and helped launch KVEA/52 as well as Telemundo, a Spanish-language network. He is honorary fundraising chief for the massive Mexico exhibit at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Vasquez, 36, has been mentioned as a Cabinet candidate since Bush was elected, but he has almost no private-sector experience.

Torres, for one, is hopeful, saying "it would be an opportune moment" and an "important coup" for the president.

Especially with an election coming up. Especially considering that California, with more electoral votes than any other state, also has the biggest Hispanic population.

And by naming a Hispanic to a Cabinet position, Bush would paper over differences that have lingered since the resignation in December 1990 of Education Secretary Lauro Cavazos. The first Hispanic Cabinet member, she left under pressure from the White House.