

David Luna first Latino elected in Mesa history



Maria Polletta, The Republic | azcentral.com 8:02 a.m. MST January 29, 2015

Community leader and academic David Luna, 58, was sworn in as Mesa's first elected Latino council member Jan. 13.



(Photo: Jo Wilson)

After David Luna was sworn in as Mesa's District 5 councilman Jan. 13, he walked swiftly across the stage and stepped up to the podium amid raucous applause.

"Welcome, everyone. It's a pleasure to be here with you. It's a privilege," he said in Spanish, before smoothly switching into English to discuss economic-development, aviation and public-safety goals for the city.

It was a subtle but poignant nod to the Hispanic voters who helped make Luna, 58, Mesa's first elected Latino council member in the city's 136-year history.

For decades, the feat had seemed out of reach, despite Latinos growing to constitute more than 26 percent of Mesa's population. In some cases, Latino candidates gave it their best shot and were defeated; in others, would-be candidates didn't even try.

"People might say, 'Oh, big deal' about David being elected. But it is a big deal," said Phillip Austin, former president of the Mesa Association of Hispanic Citizens. Austin lost a Mesa Council bid in 2008.

"There is a historical backdrop against which this is happening, and that history includes discrimination and suppression," Austin said. "To me, this... marks a long overdue change."

Luna, a Douglas native, had accepted a temporary City Council appointment in 2013 thinking it would be a one-time deal. As he learned more about city governance and got hooked on economic-development work, though, community members and colleagues began encouraging him to officially run for the post, he said.

He ran an exceedingly cordial campaign last year, even vouching for opponent Robert Cluff's character. But he couldn't hide his giddiness in an interview after the swearing-in.

"I've broken the glass ceiling, as they say," he said. "I think there's been the notion that there has been no voice representing Latino issues in the community. I think the people of Mesa are understanding that the past has to change, and they have to look for a better future, and that future includes everyone."

Luna drew in voters of all backgrounds with his seemingly interminable resume, which he has loaded with academic and non-profit work over the years.

The director of educational television for Mesa Public Schools has a bachelor's in radio-television production, a master's in mass communication and a doctorate in educational leadership. He was named Mesa's 2012 Man of the Year, the city's most prestigious community-service honor.

Voters also had nearly a year following Luna's appointment to evaluate his work as a council member, and "he did a stellar job on constituent service in that time," Mesa Councilman Dennis Kavanaugh said.

"I think that played a big role," Kavanaugh said, calling Luna's election "a milestone in our city's history."

Luna repeatedly has vowed to keep serving Mesa residents of all stripes, though Latino constituents and activists from beyond his district regularly reach out to him with questions and requests.

For instance, several Mesa residents told *The Republic* they hope Luna uses his position to advocate for diversity in employment and procurement among qualified candidates, citing what some view as a startling lack of minorities among city department heads and MPS school-board members.

And community pressure to reduce explicit discrimination began to build last year, after a 2014 Arizona State University Morrison Institute survey concluded Hispanic residents and a handful of other minority groups were more vulnerable to bigotry than the average Mesa citizen. Mayor John Giles in early January unveiled a diversity and inclusion pledge in response, which Luna called a "very important" step.

"If somebody is feeling outside of the norm, then we need to make efforts to reach out to them and bring them into the fold," Luna said. "I grew up in poverty. I grew up on the border. I grew up speaking Spanish. So, I understand some of those issues."

That understanding has allowed Luna to connect with Latino movers and shakers outside of Mesa as well. In November, he traveled to Hermosillo, Mexico with the Maricopa Association of Governments to talk municipal trade.

"I understand border politics and how that works, how you navigate through that maze," he said. "I'm looking at potential partnerships with companies in Hermosillo to bring some more economic-development opportunities our way, because that's really what I'm trying to focus on."

Luna also plans to continue his work to get Latino residents — especially young ones — involved in the community and considering leadership roles. At least four Hispanic college students from Benedictine University in Mesa have shadowed Luna at City Hall in recent months to learn more about city government.

One of those students, 19-year-old Lesly Herrera, said the experience made her feel important and supported in her academic goals, motivating her to think bigger.

"(Luna's) getting elected, it's very moving," she said. "Being able to see that he as a Hispanic man is able to be in a position that's high up in our community definitely makes me look at things like, 'We can definitely do that. I can become something big.'"

David Luna

Age: 58.

Hometown: Douglas, Ariz.

Family: Wife Hilda; two daughters; two grandchildren.

Current job: Director of educational television for Mesa Public Schools.

Appointed to Mesa City Council: September 2013.

Elected to Mesa City Council: August 2014.

Education: Bachelor's in radio-television production from the University of Arizona (1979); master's in mass communication from Arizona State University (1999); doctorate in educational leadership from Northern Arizona University (2012).

Previous community-service positions: A New Leaf board member; Mesa Association of Hispanic Citizens board member; Latino Town Hall co-chair; Mesa Community College Commission on Excellence in Education member; Latino Advisory Committee member; Mesa United Way board member; Mesa Day Labor Task Force member; Mesa Community Action Network member; United Food Bank board member; and Arizona Schools Public Relations Association member, among others.