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Twin Cities, Uruguay strengthen ties

By Jordana Timerman



FITCHBURG -- Embracing the growing Latino population of Fitchburg and Leominster, Mayors Dan Mylott and Dean Mazzarella welcomed the Uruguayan General Consul of New York, Adriana Lissidini, at a ceremony Tuesday.

SENTINEL & ENTERPRISE / SARAH BRITAIN Uruguayan General Consul to New York Adriana Lesadini speaks with Fitchburg Neighborhood Liaison Martin Aristegui and Leominster Public Schools Director of Bilingual and ESL Programs Sergio Páez at Fitchburg City Hall, Tuesday.

The ceremony represented the formal beginning of communication with Uruguayan officials, according to Mylott.

"Ties to Uruguay are important" for immigrants living in the two cities, Mylott said. "The Uruguayan community has grown so large that we thought, they thought, this was the next step."

Lissidini's visit is part of a project to bring consulate representation to serve the area's Uruguayans. According to the consul, there are about 6,000 Uruguayans living in the area.

There are roughly 3.5 million people in Uruguay, Lissidini said.

Uruguayans, a large portion of the cities' Latino population "bring a good sense of community to our cities," Mylott, Fitchburg's mayor, said.

"The mere fact that (the consul) is here is a major statement," Mazzarella, Leominster's mayor, said. He called the idea of bringing consulate services to the cities "progressive and futuristic."

Immigrants must go to the consulate for any official documents, according to Martin Aristegui, Fitchburg's neighborhood liaison.

But the consulate with jurisdiction over Massachusetts is in New York, too far for most working immigrants, Aristegui said.

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Lissidini came to Fitchburg for a weekend last month and worked with Uruguayan citizens to help them renew their passports.

Lissidini estimated that the Fitchburg-Leominster Uruguayan community is the third largest in her jurisdiction, which includes the New England states as well as the New York area.

The consul mostly renewed passports while here, but Lissidini said she also listens to the communities concerns.

"Sometimes a consul is like a psychologist," she said. "People want to ask questions, talk, comment."

For Uruguayan's, Lissidini's visit has an important symbolic aspect.

"This is tremendous, one of the best moments of the Uruguayan community," Jorge de Leon, a local Uruguayan pizzeria owner said. "This will help integrate the community, now the authorities know who we are and where we came from."

De Leon also said that the presence of a Uruguayan authority locally would add to the Uruguayan community's peace of mind.

City officials also viewed Lissidini's visit as an important moment.

"A person from Uruguay of this caliber is a watershed for Fitchburg. It raises awareness that the Latino Community is a big population," said Fitchburg Police Chief Edward Cronin.

City officials, including the mayors, all commented on the dedicated work ethic and family values shown by the Uruguayan community.

"We have noticed these families are extremely connected," said Susan Hitchcock, Assistant Superintendent of the Leominster Public Schools, noting that Uruguayan students perform well academically.

"We are very pleased," she said of the "dramatic increase" in Latino families in the city.

The political statement pleased community leaders as well.

"I'm glad to see both mayors here, supporting them," said Adrian Ford, administrator of Three Pyramids, a Fitchburg community center.

Ford also complimented the immigrants, calling them an asset for the area.

"They are very good people, so hard working," he said.

The Uruguayan immigrants have been an asset to the community, according to Mylott.

These are "very hard working people with good and close family ties," he said.

In turn, the consul praised the cities as a place for Uruguayans.

"Our people were able to find a place here," Lissidini said. "They left

our country looking for a better future, and they found it here, in these two cities."

The consul will return to process more passports once there has been an accumulation of about 40 requests, Lissidini said.

Eduardo Ibarra, president of the Consultative Council, which represents Uruguayans in New England states, will coordinate the requests.

The Council, part of the Uruguayan's government for people living outside the country, also coordinates other initiatives with the community, such as cultural interchange.

Eventually the Uruguayans would like to have a more permanent consulate in the area, Ibarra said.

The project to bring Uruguayan consulate representation to Fitchburg and Leominster area began several years ago, according to Jorge Delgado of United Uruguayans, one of the community groups organizing the initiative.

"There is an urgent need for this," he said.