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## Youthful diplomat

**Former Nogales, Ariz., mayor has been charged with revitalizing Arizona-Mexico panel.**

By Thomas Whittingslow

Special to the Arizona Daily Star

When Gov. Janet Napolitano selected 26-year-old Marco Lopez Jr. to head the Arizona-Mexico Commission, she gave him a mandate to revitalize the commission, which advises the governors of Arizona and Sonora and acts as a de facto lobbying group.

The November 2003 appointment came before Lopez finished his second term as mayor of Nogales, Ariz.

What can Santa Cruz County expect from this new executive director? According to news reports, Lopez was chosen over border leaders twice his age based on his performance as mayor of Nogales. At 22, he was one of the youngest elected mayors in the history of the country. He was re-elected in 2002 with a 76 percent majority. Lopez is the first mayor in Nogales' history to be elected to a four-year term. Prior to the 2002 election, terms for Nogales mayors were two years.

Former Gov. Paul Fannin is credited with chartering the Arizona-Sonora West Coast Trade Commission in 1959; that entity later evolved into the Arizona-Mexico Commission.

The present-day commission is charged with promoting regional development and improving the quality of life of residents in the Arizona/Mexico region.

Lopez is charged with transforming the commission into a viable political and economic entity, from what has been called an ineffectual body that simply passes proclamations and then publishes them on the Web.

"The governor makes it very clear that she expects results," he says.

In his new role as executive director of the commission, Lopez is in a position to influence the agendas of the governors of Arizona and Sonora. "Finding new ways to attract more business fits into the administration's goal of increasing trade with Mexico and Latin America, which is a top priority," he says. A study sponsored by the commission points out Mexican shoppers and tourists brought nearly \$1.6 billion into the local economies of Arizona.

Lopez says his political epiphany came in Washington, D.C., in 1994, when visiting South African President Nelson Mandela said to him, "When I go to my resting place, I will go smiling, knowing that young people like you will lead such a wonderful country." Lopez was working as a page for Rep. Ed Pastor at the time.

Motivated by this experience, Lopez enrolled in the University of Arizona's Arizona International College. He became the founder of a political activist group and credits that experience for his ability to reach out and draw from

### Biography

> **Age:** 26

> **Career:** Executive director of the Arizona-Mexico Commission. Elected mayor of Nogales, Ariz., when he was 22; re-elected in 2002 with a 76 percent majority. Appointed by Gov. Janet Napolitano to head up the Arizona-Mexico Commission in November 2003. Worked with the advance team in Vice President Al Gore's presidential campaign. Holds an Arizona real estate license.

> **Education:** Bachelor of arts in political science from the University of Arizona, Arizona International College.

> **Family:** Single. Parents are Ester and Marco Lopez Sr. of Nogales, Ariz.

> **Santa Cruz connection:** Born in Nogales, Sonora; became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1996.

divergent viewpoints and create a middle ground.

Lopez graduated cum laude in 1999 with a bachelor's degree in political science.

The same year he was hired to travel with the advance team of Vice President Al Gore's presidential campaign.

That is when he became keenly aware of the shortage of young political leaders, particularly Hispanics.

His goal is to become Arizona's governor by the time he is 40.

Looking back, Lopez says that his primary accomplishment for the city of Nogales was to leave the city with an open and transparent government where people at all levels feel comfortable asking questions.

Early in his administration, Lopez did weekly neighborhood walks, going door-to-door, introducing himself to residents and asking what the city could do to better their lives.

Many in Nogales say the young mayor's greatest achievement was making Phoenix and Washington, D.C., more aware of Nogales' importance to the economy and the nation's security.

Lopez says he believes that the governor picked him to head the Arizona-Mexico Commission because issues affecting Nogales every day also affect Arizona. Lopez says he now hopes to translate his accomplishments in the border community and focus them statewide.

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