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Running for the goal line

By Richard Gonzales
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Robert Rivera, as chairman of the Arlington Convention and Visitors Bureau, and Robert Cluck, then Arlington City Council member, hatched a bold play back in the summer of 2001: Arlington should be the new home of the Dallas Cowboys.

Together they formed Touchdown Arlington to convince Cowboys owner Jerry Jones and Arlington residents that they should form a partnership. Jones wanted a new stadium, and city leaders were anxious to bring in new revenues.

Three years later, Rivera and the co-chairs of the Vote Yes campaign -- former and current mayors -- celebrated their victory with Jones at the Wyndham Hotel after voters agreed to bring the Cowboys to Arlington.

Rivera relishes community involvement and thinks that he's ready to perform his political magic again.

This time he seeks to fend off accusations of being a corporate welfare advocate as he strives to capture the District 3 Arlington City Council seat.

If elected, Rivera would be the second Latino to serve on the council. Dan Serna, a fellow Republican, served from 1993 to 1997.

Rivera says he deserves to be elected not because he's Latino but because he's the best-qualified candidate.

Attending Ethel Goodman and St. Maria Goretti elementaries and Nolan High School, Rivera found that his schooling, easy-going disposition and business finesse helped him rub shoulders with the city's elite.

He recalls that when he was 18 and ran for Arlington City Council the first time, Mayor Richard Greene mentored him about local politics.

In 1990, he was the youngest member of Homerun Arlington, the group that gained voter approval for the new Rangers baseball stadium. A prized baseball poster autographed by one of the Rangers' most important owners -- George W. Bush -- hangs in his office.

In this council race, Rivera walks an ethnic tight rope.

On the one hand, he wishes to avoid offending Anglo voters, who tend to vote more often and in greater numbers than Latinos. On the other hand, he recognizes that the increasingly diverse city population will eventually tip the advantage to ethnic voters.

"The Latino community is a political sleeping giant," he says.

He attributes Latino political dormancy to time restrictions, the lack of Latino political machines and political ignorance. But he recognizes that a Latino political awakening will soon come as the children of immigrants earn their diplomas and decide to make Arlington their home.

Rivera has seen the future of Arlington and is positioning himself to be on the receiving end of Latino votes.

At 33, he is young enough to run many more times and eventually win election to the City Council -- or even become mayor. In the meantime, touting his skills in working with the Anglo establishment and uttering occasional Spanish words may provide the ballast he needs.

For now Rivera, like Serna, is a safe candidate for Anglo voters. Even more so than Serna, he should be seen as bridge-builder between the Anglo and Latino communities.

Rivera recognizes that Arlington city government is not representative of the population.

"We have a percentage of the population that is missing from the political process," he says. "In order to have the best community, you need to have representation from everybody."

If elected, he promises to champion the cause of bringing more minorities onto city boards and commissions.

Rivera's perseverance, knack for team building and political savvy might make him the only person in Arlington who can open government doors to Latinos.

Rivera -- and Arlington -- deserves to taste victory again.

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