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"For Mexico, there is no other relationship as important as that with the U.S."

RICARDO PINEDA, Mexican consul

## Idaho's Mexico connection



DARIN OSWALD / doswald@idahostatesman.com

Maria Silva, a documentation specialist at the 1½-year-old Mexican Consulate in Boise, assists a couple in October.

## New consulate in Boise serves Mexicans in the U.S. while courting Americans interested in life and work in Mexico

BY ANNA WEBB

awebb@idahostatesman.com

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When Consul Ricardo Pineda meets with clients in Idaho, many ask him the same question: "What took you so long?"

The Consulate of Mexico, tucked into an office complex near Broadway and Park-Center Boulevard, is instantly recognizable by the Mexican flag flying outside. It opened in Boise a year and a half ago. Before then, the nearest Mexican Consulate was in Salt Lake City. The new consulate in Boise — one of 50 in the U.S. — serves Mexican citizens across Idaho and Montana.

As debates over immigration issues rage on, consulate staffers continue their dizzyingly diverse work: helping Mexican citizens living in the U.S. renew their Mexican passports, processing visas for American students studying in Mexico, aiding Mexican tourists with medical crises, even advising American retirees planning relocations to Mexico. The consulate receives between 30 and 40 walk-in clients each day. Its staff has served 25,000 people since it opened its doors in April 2009.

One new project, a health information window in the consulate lobby, a partnership with St. Luke's Health System, offers

information in Spanish about local medical services. The Mexican minister of health, Jose Angel Cordova Villalobos, will be in Boise on Monday to inaugurate the project, said press attaché Sebastian Galvan Duque.

Though Spain and France have honorary consuls who offer some services here, the Consulate of Mexico is the first official consulate in the state.

About 10 percent of Idaho's population, or approximately 144,000 people, is of Mexican descent.

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### VISIT THE MEXICAN CONSULATE

The Consulate of Mexico in Boise is at 701 Morrison Knudsen Plaza Drive, Suite 102.

Questions: Sebastian Galvan Duque, press attaché: 954-8853 or sgalvanduque@sre.gob.mx.

### WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CONSULATE AND AN EMBASSY?

A consulate is the residence of a consul in a foreign city. Consulates handle commercial affairs and personal needs of citizens of the appointing country.

An embassy is the official office of an ambassador in a foreign country. Embassies handle the political relations between one nation and another.

There can be numerous consulates in a foreign country, but only one embassy.

### CONSULATE

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The consulate staff is concerned with humanitarian issues — repatriating the bodies of Mexicans who die in the United States, for example, or meeting with Mexican citizens imprisoned in U.S. jails, making sure their human rights are being protected.

Other offices inside the consulate focus on cultural outreach. The consulate partnered with the Idaho Historical Society, for example, for recent Day of the Dead festivities.

"We want to show the different sides of Mexico beyond the mariachis," Pineda said. His staff members, he added, are graduates of universities from across Mexico. They are bilingual, of course, but also bicultural — familiar with cultural mores in the United States and Mexico.

An economic development office at the consulate works to build trade relationships between American and Mexican companies. In the past month, five Idaho

companies in search of manufacturers and suppliers for their products have consulted with consulate staff about business opportunities in Mexico, said Galvan Duque.

"There is also urgency to develop partnerships and find business opportunities," Pineda said. "In 2009, U.S. exports to Mexico totaled \$186 million. We think we can do better."

### CONSULATE IN IDAHO: SOME HAD DOUBTS

"There were a number of people at all levels, including state government, who felt (the consulate) would be opening the door to undocumented workers," said Margie Gonzalez, director of the Idaho Commission on Hispanic Affairs.

Former U.S. Rep. Bill Salvi, a Republican, petitioned the federal government to delay the opening of the consulate in Boise, concerned that the consulate would aid Mexican citizens here illegally.

The consulate does not get involved in U.S. immigration laws, said Galvan Duque.

"The consulate's staff is not licensed to practice law,

so we cannot give any type of legal advice regarding immigration issues. When someone asks us for this type of service, we recommend they contact a local immigration attorney who can best provide them assistance in any matter regarding U.S. immigration laws," he said.

Since the day the consulate opened, Pineda said, the relationship with the local community has been "incredible."

"We are here to advocate for the Mexican community, but also to serve the community as a whole," Pineda said. The consulate works with American students, business owners and others who wish to live in Mexico.

"As we have tried to bring this message out, we have not been subject to any kind of misinterpretation of any sort," he said.

He invites people with questions about the consulate to come see its work firsthand: "We are an open window into our country."

The work of the Consulate of Mexico is parallel to the work of the nine U.S. consulates on Mexican soil, Pineda said.

### CONSULATE IN THE COMMUNITY

The location of the consulate near Downtown Boise

— rather than in Canyon County, where a large share of Idahoans of Mexican descent live — is strategic, said Pineda, who held posts at the Mexican Embassy in Washington, D.C., and the consulate in San Diego before coming to Boise.

"We have a need and duty to foster a relationship between the consulate and state government in the capital city. But, we travel," Pineda said.

Seventeen times this year, Pineda and consulate employees have headed out on the road through the "mobile

consulate" program to meet with clients across Idaho and Montana. The mobile consulate lets Mexican citizens meet with the consul without having to travel to Boise, missing work and losing pay.

Millie Gaitan-Gonzalez, director of La Alianza Multicultural Center in Hailey, said the mobile consulate has been to Hailey twice to help Mexican residents with tasks like renewing their passports and registering the birth of their American-born children for dual citizenship with Mexico.

"The consul and his staff

arrives. They set up shop at 8 a.m. They don't even stop for lunch until the last person is taken care of," Gaitan-Gonzalez said.

The Mexican Consulate also helps Idahoans of Mexican descent keep connections with their former homes.

Lucio Prado, owner of Boise restaurant El Gallo Giro, has lived in the Treasure Valley for three decades and sits on the board of the Idaho Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. The "3x1 for Migrants" program administered by the consulate lets him make community improvement donations to his hometown in Mexico — Tacatzcuaro, a small village in the state of Michoacan.

Federal, state and municipal governments in Mexico match his donations.

"The idea is to get Mexican people who live around the world to contribute to the welfare in Mexico," said Prado. The consulate's "3x1" program helped build a small sports complex, including a soccer field and basketball courts, in Tacatzcuaro.

Other consulate programs help educate Mexican citizens living in the United States. The Mexican Consulate administers a program at La Alianza through which adults can complete their 6th- or 9th-grade educations for free.

Gaitan-Gonzalez, who is from Guatemala, said five students are now working in the program in Hailey, where many people who work in Sun Valley live. Her students include landscapers, a housekeeper, a dishwasher and a clerk in a grocery store. Volunteers help staff the program.

"My oldest student was a Mexican woman who was 71. She wanted to learn to read and write so she could write letters back home," Gaitan-Gonzalez said.

Anna Webb: 377-6431

### ANNA WEBB

Anna Webb, a native Boisean, has been a reporter at the Statesman since 2002. She writes about the local community and nonprofit happenings and organizations.



Patricia Saenz, with her daughter Fatima, 6, gets help processing a passport at the Mexican Consulate in Boise.

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Rodrigo Garibay, with the Mexican Consulate Community Affairs Department, answers a question in the waiting room at the consulate.



Lucio Prado, owner of El Gallo Giro in Boise, works with the Mexican Consulate in Boise to send money back to Mexico for community projects. Private donations are matched by state and federal governments in Mexico under the program.