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**Edition of June 22, 2007**

## First Hispanic to Lead Chamber

By Anne DeCecco   
Observer Staff Writer

When Raul Danny Vargas takes the helm of the Dulles Regional Chamber of Commerce next month, he will become the first Hispanic to lead the chamber. His service as chairman of the chamber also would mark the first time a Hispanic will lead a traditional chamber of commerce in the Commonwealth of Virginia, according to the chamber.

"Our chamber has had a leading role in promoting opportunities for Hispanic businesses," Eileen Curtis, chamber president and CEO, said in a press release. "It is both appropriate and exciting that the Dulles Regional Chamber should be the first chamber to be led by an Hispanic businessman. Danny is full of ideas and a natural leader."

Vargas, founder and CEO of VARCom Solutions, has been an active member of the chamber for the past three years and helped form the Hispanic Business Council. He is active in the chamber's marketing and communications and global business committees, and prior to taking on his current role as vice-chairman of the chamber he was vice president of the marketing and communications committee. He has also been a resident of the Herndon and Reston area for the past 15 years.

Incumbent chairman Justin Exner said Vargas's company VARCom was instrumental in providing a market analysis and helping the chamber transition when it expanded into the Chantilly-Centreville area. "So he has a unique perspective of what the members and the membership is looking for," Exner said.

Chamber protocol dictates that the vice-chairman is automatically next in line as chairman. Vargas assumed the role of vice-chairman about a month ago.

"It really is humbling," Vargas said in an interview Monday. "I'm a poor kid from Brooklyn." Vargas said he grew up in a neighborhood with little resources, where he lived with his three older siblings and his mother, a former indentured servant from Puerto Rico. His parents divorced when he was two and his mother never learned English. He recalled eating ice cubes for some dinners and said that growing up,

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prospects for the future were very dim.

"Only in America can you go from something like that to being able to come in and step in to being the chairman of such a prestigious, well respected, long lasting organization like this chamber of commerce. So it's very humbling."

Vargas worked in intelligence for the Air Force for seven years and later continued as an intelligence expert for a government contractor. After 11 years of taking classes on nights and weekends, he earned his Bachelor's degree in management in 1994. In 1995, he decided to switch to the private sector and began working for Sprint. Later he spent six years with Global One as director of corporate and carrier sales of the Americas region and then worked at France Telecom's carrier division, where he was the vice president of sales and marketing for the Americas. In 2004, he started VARCom Solutions, a company that provides businesses with marketing, sales and communications services. During his time at VARCom, he also spent a year working as an executive at America Online, first as vice president of global sales for voice and then as vice president of Latin America.

Vargas said he believes strongly in community service. He serves on the board of several nonprofit organizations and he helped U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-10th) start his own Hispanic Advisory Committee. "Over the years, as I was able to achieve some level of success, I knew that I also wanted to give back to this community that helped me get here," Vargas said.

Although his duties will not start for about a month, Vargas said he already has big plans for his time as chairman. He said strategic planning meetings will continue and a board of directors' retreat is scheduled for July 20.

Vargas said he wants to focus on three areas within the chamber. The first involves assisting members with business growth, training and networking opportunities. Vargas said he wants to hold training and adult education events and work with nearby schools to help with workforce training. He said he also wants to put a strong emphasis on serving the community, which he sees as an important responsibility of area businesses. His third focus, he said, will be on economic developments. Vargas said it is important to keep the area competitive by working with local governments and other organizations.

Vargas said it is an "added responsibility" to serve as the first Hispanic chairman of a traditional Virginia chamber and the Dulles regional chamber, but it will also be beneficial.

"I see it as an opportunity to be able to reach out to all segments of the community, Hispanic and mainstream and Asian, etcetera, and say that this is a great opportunity for us to come together in a positive way, in a productive, constructive way," Vargas said. "It also gives me the opportunity to leverage whatever visibility I'm able to garner to be able to reach specifically within the Hispanic community and let them know

that this thing you hear about, about the 'American Dream,' it's real, it's doable, it's achievable."

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