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San Bernardino Sun (San Bernardino, CA)

October 29, 2005 Saturday

LENGTH: 830 words**HEADLINE:** Parties pushing way into normally nonpartisan races**BYLINE:** Edward Barrera, Staff Writer**BODY:**

A little-noticed Upland endorsement offers a glimpse into the future of Inland Empire politics.

The news that the San Bernardino County Republican Party is backing two Upland school board candidates, Robert Bennett and Wes Fifield, in the Nov.8 election surprised several Upland officials who had never seen political parties becoming involved in the typically nonpartisan elections.

They shouldn't be surprised and should be prepared for even more local endorsements in city council, school board and water district races, said Republican Party officials.

"A goal for the [county's Republican Party] is to get in a position so that the party is involved in every race where a Republican is running against a non-Republican," said Brad Mitzelfelt, resolutions and endorsements chairman for the county Republican Central Committee. "It's a concerted effort to maximize a Republican majority and create a Republican bench for higher office."

Ralph Rossum, director of Claremont McKenna College's **Rose Institute** of State and Local Government, said there has been a long tradition of nonpartisan local elections in California. While he pointed out that special-interest groups such as teachers' unions have become more involved in local races, he believed political party endorsements were a newer phenomenon.

"It does seem unfortunate and inappropriate that a party involves itself in a local school board race because it interjects a kind of partisanship that wasn't there before," he said.

County Democratic and Republican committees have sporadically endorsed local candidates in the past, said party officials. But they both intend to expand their endorsement efforts, which brings more visibility, organization and funds to fuel local party candidates.

Outside of Upland, the Republicans endorsed candidates for board seats in the Colton Joint Unified School District, Cucamonga Water District and Chaffey Community College Board, and for San Bernardino mayoral candidate Chas Kelley.

County Democrats have endorsed candidates for the Etiwanda School District, the Colton school district and the Yucaipa-Calimesa Joint Unified School District, and two candidates for the San Bernardino City Council and mayoral candidate Patrick J. "Pat" Morris.

"We have instituted an endorsement process this year to help communicate to voters which candidates are interested in participating in the Democratic Party and follow the ideals of the party," said Tim Prince, an officer with the county Democratic Central Committee.

Upland Mayor John Pomierski, endorsed by the Republican Party in his 2004 re-election campaign, was flabbergasted that the party decided to endorse school board candidates. While emphasizing that it wasn't a reflection on any of the candidates' qualifications, he said certain races should stay outside of party politics.

"I am blown away that a political party would get involved in a school board election,' he said. "I've never heard of a party endorsing a candidate for school board. What's next, the PTA?"

Andy Megaw, president of the Upland Unified School Teachers Union, also was surprised county political parties were becoming involved in school board elections. Acknowledging that the union endorsed the three other candidates, Pat Bogatz, P. Joseph Lenz and Michael Varela, he said the union's focus was on education, not on politics.

But Republican-endorsed candidate Bennett dismissed the claim that politics weren't involved in picking school board candidates.

"We can now hear and see individual candidates discuss their priorities according to their liberal or conservative perspective,' he said. "This has always been a hidden component of school board elections because they are supposed to be nonpartisan elections."

Ron Nehring, vice chairman of the California Republican Party, said the teachers' unions have held too much sway over school boards for far too long.

"The simple answer is that there is no such thing as a nonpartisan election,' he said. "[Unions] expect to have a monopoly on supporting candidates for the school board, and they don't get to have a monopoly."

Republican parties in Riverside, Orange, Los Angeles and San Diego counties have already formulated organization plans to push for candidates in every local election, said Nehring, who is also the San Diego County Republican Party chairman. The trend will grow as counties continue to have success, he added.

Sam Levin, political reform project manager for the Los Angeles based-Center for Governmental Studies, said it makes sense for political parties to become more involved. The power of school boards and water districts continues to grow and parties want to make sure their interests are taken into account, he said.

"The only potential bad is that you will see the rise in money, and money has the potential of corrupting the process,' he said. "It can take out the freshness of a candidate and make it a spending race."

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