



Runoff spurs more strife

SAN BERNARDINO: Two mayoral candidates vow to improve "dysfunctional government" as election nears.

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By CHRIS RICHARD / The Press-Enterprise

Here are some examples from recent San Bernardino politics:

A mayoral candidate publicly accused opponents of threatening him with forged photos and videos showing him in "compromising situations." He offered no proof and later declined to comment.

Facing an increase in homicides, the City Council voted to increase the police department by 10 percent. But they provided neither funding nor a schedule for hiring.

Most local governments have their tales of factional squabbles, missed opportunities and jumbled decisions. But long-time observers say San Bernardino City Hall is especially chaotic and inept.

Now, mayoral candidates Pat Morris and Jim Penman are heading toward a Feb. 7 runoff election, each promising to guide the city as it enters a turning point.

It's an open question whether either can shape the city's course as he wishes.

"To move forward, you've got to be able to get people to work together," said Shauna Clark, a former city administrator. "And that has always been a problem in San Bernardino."

Some point to a city charter that pits an elected city attorney against the mayor. Some blame San Bernardino's ward system, saying it tempts council members to fixate on neighborhood issues and forget the greater good. Some attribute the problems to shaky finances. Some cite a miasma of strife that has enveloped City Hall for generations.

Clifford Young, who teaches public policy at Cal State San Bernardino and served as an appointed county supervisor said City Hall can no longer afford what he terms "a history of dysfunctional government."

After two decades of economic stagnation, San Bernardino is starting to share the benefits of a surging real estate market. New business and residential development has jumped sharply, with the city's median home price topping \$300,000 in 2005.

Young said the prosperity could bypass San Bernardino if officials fail to move decisively on city policies.

Compromising Situations

Even controversies with no direct bearing on development could have an effect, Young said.

One example of the discord Young describes occurred in October, when City Attorney Penman accused political opponents of seeking to derail his mayoral bid by threatening him with fabricated photos and videos showing him in "compromising situations."

Penman attributed the alleged extortion attempt to former Mayor Bob Holcomb and mayoral rival Rick Avila, both of whom laughed and denied it.

Police Lt. Mark Garcia said no criminal charges have been filed. Asked about the claim Wednesday, Penman declined to comment.

"That was just a typical Penman tactic," said Tim Prince, a long-time Penman critic who ran for mayor in 1998. "Jim does this sort of thing every time he runs for office."

Many of Penman's political opponents tie City Hall strife to the city attorney's explosive and unpredictable temper.

"I don't lose my temper, I use it," Penman said.

And sometimes, Penman said, his responsibility to the public requires him to take a firm stand against other officials.

City Hall Strife

Clark, who also clashed with Penman, said City Hall tensions predate any of the current leaders. During one scrap between former Mayor Al Ballard and former City Attorney Ralph Prince, the two men altered the entrances to their adjoining offices to prevent each other from seeing what was going on inside, she said.

"I blame the city charter," Clark said. "It's based on checks and balances. ... But the essential power under the charter is the power to prevent things from happening. There's nothing in the charter that makes people work together."

City Councilman Neil Derry says one solution could be rewriting the charter so that at least three council seats are elected at large.

Morris said he would favor charter changes to make the city attorney an advisory position, not a policy position.

"Right now, we've got a charter that's got us pinned in the last century, and we need to move forward," he said.

One possibility could be switching to a city manager form of government, which places most executive power with an executive hired under a contract, said Steven Frates, a senior fellow at the Claremont McKenna College's Rose Institute of State and Local Government.

Such a system concentrates authority in a non-partisan professional answerable to the city council, and

gives elected officials a mechanism to work together, Frates said.

But before such changes are likely, there must be strong support for reform among city voters, said David Luberoff, executive director of the Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government.

Recurring Rivalries

San Bernardino, first a railroad community and later the home of Norton Air Force Base, has long had many renters and low participation in local elections.

Luberoff said the rivalries between San Bernardino's political fiefdoms mirror those in other communities with transient populations. In such situations, politicians cater to small constituencies with familiar agendas, Luberoff said.

He said that may change as more people buy homes, get involved in local government and demand coherent city policy.

But even when city officials do work together, they can make decisions that baffle outsiders. That's happened earlier this month, when council members sought to counter a spike in violent crime.

They voted 5-2 to hire 35 new police officers. Council members favoring the decision say it represents a fundamental change in city policy, giving law enforcement a priority.

But the council did not provide money or a schedule for hiring them. Council members Derry and Chas Kelley, who cast the dissenting votes, call the policy empty.

Police union President Rich Lawhead shares that sentiment.

"The problem is, all the council members have their own pet projects, and when it comes to spending the money on officers, they'll say they have other priorities to consider," he said. "But how can there be a higher priority than people dying in the streets?"

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