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## Great divide defines race in 59th Assembly District

By Gary Scott Staff Writer  
San Gabriel Valley Tribune

The Republican primary to replace Assemblyman Dennis Mountjoy is not just a race between two established conservatives - it's a battle between two distinct communities drawn together in one of the most gerrymandered districts in California.

Anthony Adams of Hesperia and Chris Lancaster of La Verne have emerged as the leading contenders for the 59th Assembly District seat. As they head into the June primary election, they will campaign for every vote they can get.

But to win, Adams and Lancaster will have more than each other to contend with. They will have to overcome geography.

Forged in the 2001 statewide redistricting plan, the 59th is unwieldy and unusually large. It links the High Desert com-

munities of Apple Valley and Hesperia with the foothill cities of the San Gabriel Valley. The drive from one side of the district to the other is 101 miles, but the social and cultural divide between the two regions is even greater.

"They are two different universes," said Douglas Johnson, a fellow at the Rose Institute at Claremont McKenna College. "The issues in the High Desert are almost entirely different from the issues in the San Gabriel Valley.

"Time spent working on one area's issues," he added, "is time the other area is going to be neglected."

The communities are separated by forest, a mountain range and a county line. They have different histories, cultures and identities.

Century-old cities such as Sierra Madre and Claremont are focused on redeveloping aging downtowns. Meantime, once rural High Desert cities are accommodating explosive growth in housing and strip malls.

While there are areas of shared concern, such as traffic congestion, the two regions are more likely to be competing for resources than sharing them.

The one overriding similarity - and the reason they were sandwiched together on the political map - is their large pockets of dependably Republican voters.

As part of a bipartisan deal struck five years ago, Democratic districts were made more Democratic and Republican districts made more Republican. The resulting map has been ridiculed as an "incumbency protection plan," and is the subject of recent calls for redistricting reform.

The 59th is a "fairly extreme" example of gerrymandered districts, Johnson said. Once wholly in L.A. County, the district shifted eastward, following the migration patterns of conservative middle-class families leaving L.A. in search of cheaper housing in the Inland Empire and High Desert.

"They were worried about increasing numbers of Democratic voters" in the foothill cities, Johnson explained, so GOP lawmakers used the Angeles National Forest as a corridor to merge solidly Republican communities in L.A. with those near San Bernardino.

Mountjoy, R-Monrovia, benefited from the changes in two ways. First, Republican registration was boosted substantially. And, second, by spreading the district over such a disparate area, it lessened the chances a popular GOP mayor would challenge him in a primary.

But with just three months

to go before the primary, the mishmash is causing grief for the candidates, both of whom have built strong constituencies at home yet are virtually unknown across the county line.

"The district is the size of Texas," quipped Lancaster. The son of the late Assemblyman Bill Lancaster and a former Covina councilman, Lancaster locked up the endorsements of much of the Republican political establishment in the San Gabriel Valley. He also is an advertising executive for this newspaper.

"It does the voters a disservice," Adams said of the redistricting plan. "You send your candidates into sort of a tailspin when you ask communities that may not have a shared interest to vote for one candidate."

Adams, a former aide to San Bernardino County Supervisor Bill Postmus, has the support of most of the GOP establishment in the High Desert.

"This is a family feud," said Allan Hoffenblum, publisher of the California Target Book, which handicaps political races across the state. "Each has a power base. Each comes from a separate county."

Hoffenblum said the winning candidate is likely to be the person who can convince voters on the other side of the county line that he or she is the "true-blue conservative."

It has long been the conventional wisdom that, once Mountjoy left office, the 59th would turn over to a well-funded Republican from the High Desert, said Martin Truitt, a Republican political strategist from Pasadena.

Mountjoy is termed out this year.

"In a crowded field, the votes are in the High Desert," Truitt said.

The dynamics of the 59th are part of a larger trend of Republicans moving inland, Truitt added. "The interior is getting more red and the coasts are getting more blue. Over time, it is going to cause all kinds of ramifications."

Voter registration numbers would indicate the 59th is a draw, with Republicans split almost evenly on either side of the county line. There are 55,246 registered Republicans in the L.A. portion of the district compared with 55,365 on the San Bernardino side.

Yet, the figures also show a sharp increase in Republican registration in the east and a steady decline in the west. Since 2002, the registration has jumped 25 percent on the San Bernardino side of the 59th. In the same period, the L.A. side has seen an 8-percent drop.

There are myriad other factors that will play into the

primary, including the recent addition of two Republican challengers into the race.

Barry Hartz of Apple Valley joined the fight a couple weeks ago. His residence would indicate he is more of a threat to Adams, but Hartz used to live in the San Gabriel Valley and is seeking Mountjoy's endorsement. If successful, he could siphon away votes from Lancaster.

Susan Slater, an attorney who also is from Apple Valley, will announce her candidacy this week. She plans to make illegal immigration the centerpiece of her campaign - an issue she hopes resonates with hard-core Republicans whatever their address.

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