



Crime tops runoff debate

MAYOR: Economy stays on the sidelines due to the surging rates of slayings in San Bernardino.

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By **CHRIS RICHARD** / The Press-Enterprise

SAN BERNARDINO - After decades of economic stagnation, San Bernardino finally is starting to benefit from a regional real-estate boom.

Surging overseas trade, and its accompanying need for distribution centers, could bring city residents the jobs they crave.

The city center, long characterized by empty storefronts and vacant lots, has major mixed-use developments in the works.

But the city also had 57 killings last year, and at least five more in the first four weeks of 2006.

Voters' fears about the homicide toll have come to dominate a six-month-long mayor's race that winds up early next month with a runoff election between Superior Court Judge Pat Morris and San Bernardino City Attorney Jim Penman.

Penman said most queries at community forums have concerned crime, and that is what he is focusing on.

"When you have 11-year-old kids gunned down at supper time, or when you have a man on the way home from work gunned down half a block from City Hall, no economic development plan in the world is going to work," he said.

Veteran Los Angeles political consultant Rick Taylor, who advised Mayor Judith Valles in her victorious 1998 campaign, disagreed.

"If you say you're not going to address the economic issues until you solve crime, then you're never going to solve crime," Taylor said.

"I would think the average voter knows that. I'd never advise a client to say that."

But where Taylor sees myopia, Penman supporter Felton Anderson sees focus.

Anderson, 78, said in the last half-century he has seen San Bernardino "go from the all-American city to the all-American dumping ground."

"If we have less crime, we'll have more people wanting to come to town," he said. "Right now, people don't see much going on except crime, and we need somebody who will make people feel safe."

Morris, too, said law enforcement is the center of his campaign.

"Our crime rate in this city has been a problem for years, and we have to work that down. It's the single most important issue we're facing," he said.

Others say the degree to which crime fears have dominated the race is out of proportion to what the statistics show.

The city had seven more homicides in 2005 than in the preceding year. But it's still a sharp drop from 1993, when the death toll hit 87.

Police Chief Garrett Zimmon, who is on extended medical leave, has pointed out that bare statistics don't tell the whole story.

For example, one death recorded in 2005 resulted from an attack at the end of the preceding year. Another allegedly was committed by a man angry at being awakened in the middle of the night -- the sort of violent outburst no police officer could reasonably be expected to prevent, Zimmon said.

Gang violence, a volatile political flashpoint, decreased slightly, Zimmon said. But the raw statistics don't reflect such detail.

Mark Edwards, Morris' campaign treasurer, said his candidate would like to engage in a debate on economic policy. But when Morris released his economic plan earlier this month, Penman declined to offer a counter-proposal.

Since then, audience members at campaign events have rarely asked questions about issues other than law enforcement.

"I think there is some frustration with that on Pat's part," Edwards said

Sheldon Kamieniecki, a political science professor at the University of Southern California, said when it comes to crime, a snap perception is often much more potent than statistical analysis.

In recent months, several high-profile attacks have galvanized fears.

Such attacks, striking varied victims in widely varied economic circumstances, can have unusual political power, Kamieniecki said. People tend to feel like they could be victims, too, and they vote accordingly.

Penman said he's met regularly with economic advisors and, if elected, will advance an economic plan soon after taking office. He predicted that a systematic crackdown on crime, including surveillance of parolees and vigorous prosecution, could clear up the city's worst violence within 90 days.

But like Taylor, Steven Frates, a senior fellow at Claremont McKenna College's Rose Institute of State and Local Government, said it is not reasonable to separate crime fighting from economic policy.

Frates ties San Bernardino's chronically tight budgets to the city's comparatively high utility tax, which

he claims chases away business.

In the 2004 Kosmont-Rose Institute Cost of Doing Business Survey, San Bernardino ranked among the least business-friendly government agencies in the region, Frates said.

He wants to see the city ease the permitting process and lower the utility tax. That, he said, will provide the business base San Bernardino needs to provide increased public services.

"You can't hire the cops if you don't have the money," he said.

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