

Swearingin to ramp up controller campaign at state Republican gathering

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In a September 2013 file photo, Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin appears with Rep. Jim Costa, left, and U. S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx to announce a federal grant of \$15.9 million for reconstruction of Fulton Mall. ERIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin's state controller campaign will begin ramping up Friday when she starts a two-day visit to the state Republican Party convention in Burlingame.

Any effort to win statewide office in California begins with grassroots activists, and the GOP convention is the perfect time for Swearingin, a Republican, to find so many of these foot soldiers in one location.

The convention also likely will attract its share of potential donors -- both individuals and managers of political action committees that fund candidates.

"She's coming to meet with activists and major donors as she readies her campaign for controller," said Tim Clark, her Sacramento-based consultant.

Swearingin has already said that controller "is sometimes an overlooked function of state government," and as such, it can also be an overlooked political office, said Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, a veteran political analyst at the University of Southern California.

On top of that, while Swearingin may lead the state's fifth-largest city, she's making her first run for a partisan office and she's not a household name in California. Jeffe said she doesn't know Swearingin, and she guessed that a majority of the delegates from the state's far-flung reaches won't, either.

Even bigger, Jeffe said, is the relative disinterest in elections this year, not so much among the grassroots, but among the statewide media, which she said is needed for Swearingin to help build her name identification.

"It's visibility," Jeffe said. "It's name recognition. It's getting known by the donors. It's getting known by the activists. It's getting known by the media. And none of those is easy right now."

Swearingin should get busy with ground-level campaigning, Jeffe added. That means putting up placards and handing out buttons. Ideally, she would also have a small team slipping candidate information sheets into the goodie bags all delegates receive.

The centerpieces of the convention are a dinner speech Friday night by Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus, a lunch speech Saturday by former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and a dinner speech Saturday by Rep. Pete Sessions of Texas.

In between are a long list of meetings, workshops and receptions.

Swearingin, 41, plans to start with the County Chairman's Meeting, scheduled for 2 p.m. Friday. She'll have plenty more to choose from before leaving on Saturday afternoon.

Swearingin will face Assembly Speaker John Pérez and state Board of Equalization member Betty Yee in the June primary. Under state primary election rules, only the top two will move on to the November general election.

Clark is hopeful that because Swearingin will be the only Republican on the ballot, she can move to the November general election. Both Pérez and Yee are Democrats.

The current controller, Democrat John Chiang, is termed out this year and is running for state treasurer.

Swearingin has said she was recruited by state Republican Party chairman Jim Brulte, and Jeffe said if that's the case, "he's got to be part of the orchestration."

That means Brulte needs to do all he can to make sure Swearingin is as visible as possible at the convention.

"It's no skin off his nose if he decides to go all out for her," Jeffe said.

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