

Fresno Mayor Swarengin meets GOP convention delegates, party leaders

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BURLINGAME — Fresno mayor and now state controller hopeful Ashley Swarengin came to the California Republican Party convention Friday with a fairly modest goal of introducing herself to the party's grassroots activists, a cadre of dedicated GOP foot soldiers who would be key to her campaign.

It is clear Swarengin has her work cut out.

Delegates from far-flung parts of the state like Shasta and San Diego counties drew blanks when asked if they knew her. Others were vaguely familiar.

That came as no surprise to Swarengin. It's one of the reasons she came to the Bay Area peninsula city of Burlingame. And those who were able to chat her up or hear her speak came away impressed.

After Swarengin spoke for around four minutes to county Republican chairs, Tuolumne County GOP Chair Skip Conley had a favorable opinion.

"I think she makes a good candidate," he said.

Her two-day visit to the convention is in many ways a microcosm of what she faces over the next several months. She is mayor of the state's fifth-largest city, but is largely unknown outside the central San Joaquin Valley.

She will have to campaign across a vast state and try and increase her name identification. Fewer than 30% of the state's voters are registered Republicans. Swarengin will need all of them and more -- lots of independents and likely some Democrats, too, if she hopes to turn back a string of statewide election losses for Republicans.

Swarengin 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. Swarengin's campaign is hopeful she'll be one of them.

Both Pérez and Yee are Democrats. The current controller, Democrat John Chiang, is termed out this year and is running for state treasurer.

But Swearingin's small speaking window in front of the county GOP chairs highlighted her challenges. The person running the meeting stepped in to let her know that her time was up after less than five minutes. GOP gubernatorial hopefuls Tim Donnelly and Neel Kashkari, by comparison, spoke at length to the group.

She also may have to overcome GOP disdain of her support of the state's proposed high-speed rail network.

Sharon Holley, a Madera County delegate, said she never could vote for Swearingin because of her bullet-train support. If Swearingin makes the runoff against a Democrat, Holley said she'll leave that part of her ballot blank.

"I like to know where people stand, and actions speak louder than words," she said of Swearingin's backing for the controversial project.

Jon Fleischman, publisher of the popular conservative political website Flashreport.org, said he wouldn't be surprised if Swearingin changed her position on the project and became an opponent.

"Mayor Swearingin is going to find as she campaigns statewide that her position on high-speed rail will be very unpopular," he said. "On a statewide level, with Republican voters especially, (Gov.) Jerry Brown's crazy train is not popular at all."

Still, others said they are willing to overlook not only Swearingin's high-speed rail support but also the close relationship she has appeared to have forged with President Barack Obama's administration. Those in influential party positions see a bright political future for her.

Shawn Steel, a former state Republican Party chair and currently the Republican National Committee representative from California, thinks Swearingin is a great candidate.

"She is an outstanding mayor and a fresh face in the Republican Party statewide. She's going to be one of our best opportunities to win a statewide office -- if not our very best," he said.

Swearingin said one of her goals at the convention was making sure people understand the importance of the controller position.

"I think it is often overlooked by voters, but the reality is this position has more to do with business friendliness and economic competitiveness in California than probably any other office in the state except for the governor," she said. "So it's really important that someone fill the shoes that has a keen sense of protecting the taxpayers, making sure that small businesses can be successful in the Valley and throughout the state, and that's what I'm trying to communicate here today."

Swearengin arrived around 1:30 p.m. Friday along with Georgeanne White, her chief of staff who is volunteering her time for the campaign this weekend. Swearengin's campaign consultant Tim Clark arrived a short time later.

Besides speaking to the county chair meeting, Swearengin met with a prospective campaign staffer and state GOP finance chair David Horowitz, among others. She also glad-handed delegates.

In the evening, she attended the convention's VIP reception and then the dinner that featured Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus.

On Saturday, she'll meet with the party's three regional caucuses -- Los Angeles, Central Valley and Northern California. She'll have private meetings with donors and state and federal Republican lawmakers. She also plans to meet and seek endorsements from volunteer organizations such as the California College Republicans.

Clark said current state GOP chairman Jim Brulte "is very interested in her candidacy" and is giving her guidance.

Publicly, however, Brulte isn't saying much.

In a meeting with reporters, Brulte said he does not "buy into the idea that Republicans can't win statewide. We've got some really good candidates running for office statewide."

But he declined to discuss anyone in particular.

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