

Our View Ashley Swearengin and Betty Yee are best picks for controller

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Three experienced candidates are running to become California's next controller, an office that in the right hands can be a force for fiscal responsibility and accountability.

As its best, the controller is a financial watchdog whose auditors uncover misfeasance, as termed out Controller John Chiang did when he audited the corrupt city of Bell. Chiang, who is running for treasurer, halted legislators' pay in 2011 after concluding they had failed to pass a balanced budget. He also garnered attention by placing the salaries of public employees on a public website. We approved of each of those actions.

Assembly [Speaker John A. Pérez](#), a Los Angeles Democrat, is the [front-runner heading](#) into the June primary, having amassed \$2.4 million. Pérez, who is termed out of the Assembly, has been in the middle of budget negotiations since he arrived in the lower house five years ago, and has ample knowledge to carry out the duties of controller.

Campaign coffers aside, The Bee recommends Democratic [Board of Equalization member Betty Yee](#) and [Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin](#), the lone Republican seeking statewide office. The top two vote-getters, regardless of party affiliation, will face one another in November.

Yee and Swearengin are the most likely candidates to focus on the job of being controller.

Yee has spent three decades working in state government, starting as a legislative staffer, becoming a top Department of Finance official and budget adviser to Gov. Gray Davis, and chief of staff to former Board of Equalization member Carole Migden before winning election in 2006 to the board, which adjudicates tax disputes. During Davis' time as governor, Yee often urged caution on spending, advice he should have heeded more often. On the Board of Equalization, Yee avoided conflicts, unlike some other members.

Yee also turns down tobacco industry donations because the board often is called upon to decide tobacco tax matters. The controller's sits on the Board of Equalization.

The controller also serves on boards that oversee the massive California State Teachers' Retirement System and the California Public Employees' Retirement System. Pérez, Yee and Swearengin would all be sympathetic toward retirees' needs. But Pérez, a labor official before winning his Assembly seat, is much more likely to heed the public employee unions that seek to influence the pension boards than Yee and Swearengin.

Roughly 28 percent of Perez's \$2.4 million has come from labor unions. Labor has accounted for 13 percent of Yee's \$752,000.

As Fresno mayor, Swearingin presides over a city that was hard hit during the recession. Her city avoided bankruptcy and appears to be on the mend, if slowly. She butted heads with public employee unions by pushing to outsource municipal garbage collection but also is willing to cross many in her Republican Party. She supports high-speed rail, correctly viewing it as a way for the Central Valley to emerge from the economic doldrums.

Yee or Swearingin would build on Chiang's accomplishments and be independent and aggressive watchdogs of taxpayers' dollars.