

Crowded field jockeys to replace Connie Conway in 26th Assembly District

By Tim Sheehan

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After six years, term limits are forcing Assembly Republican Leader Connie Conway out of her seat representing the 26th Assembly District. And the lack of an established incumbent running again in 2014 is creating something of a free-for-all for a cadre of relative political newcomers hoping to replace her.

Of the state's 80 Assembly seats, only three have more candidates running in this year's June primary election. Seven hopefuls — four Republicans and three Democrats — have been attracted like moths to a flame to the race in the 26th District, which includes most of Tulare County, all of Inyo County and a portion of Kern County.

All seven hail from Tulare County. Most are political rookies, but two currently serve as members of their respective city councils. Two of them are naturalized Americans who emigrated from other countries.

In a district where registered Republican voters outnumber registered Democrats by almost 21,000, the odds would seem to favor the GOP in a general election. But in the June 3 primary, the top two vote-getters — regardless of party affiliation — will square off in November to decide the race.

The Republicans in the field are Teresita "Tess" Andres of Visalia, who works as a contractor providing homecare workers; Esther Barajas, a Visalia insurance broker; Devon Mathis, a veterans advocate from Visalia; and Rudy Mendoza, the mayor of Woodlake and a former business owner who works as district director for Rep. Devin Nunes, R-Visalia.

Two of the Republicans are former Democrats; according to information from the Secretary of State's Office for the past 10 years, Andres changed her voter registration from Democrat to Republican last year, while Mendoza was a registered Democrat between 2004 and 2009 before changing his affiliation to Republican.

The Democratic Party hopefuls are Carlton Jones of Tulare, who serves on the city council and works as a Fresno city firefighter; Ruben Macareno of Visalia, a local publisher; and Derek Thomas, a Tulare resident who works as a correctional officer for the state.

On key issues facing California and the district — water, jobs, education and high-speed rail — there are some on which the candidates agree, and others on which they disagree.

Water

All say that water, whether for agriculture or for low-income communities, is a priority.

Andres, who immigrated to the U.S. from the Philippines, said she believes solar power should be used for water desalination. She also favors increasing water storage in reservoirs, not by building more dams but by raising the height of existing dams. "We don't need to build new dams; we're in debt already," Andres said.

Barajas, who came with her family to the U.S. from Mexico as a child, said she opposes Gov. Jerry Brown's controversial plan for tunnels to carry water from the northern part of the state southward to protect the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta. But she wants to work with federal and state officials to make sure more of the state's water is directed to Valley agriculture. "I am also for local projects that will ensure and promote water conservation," she said.

Jones didn't mention particular plans, but said he wants to listen to experts on all sides and work with legislators in both parties to find water solutions that everybody can live with. "It doesn't matter if you're a Democrat or a Republican; if we run out of water, we're all going to be thirsty," he said.

Macareno also cited a need for compromise and a focus on safe drinking water for local towns. Macareno said that with a slew of potential bond measures being proposed in Sacramento, "I would support one that addresses drinking water and water storage, and not have a lot of pork on everything else."

A water bond is "the first thing we need to do," Mathis said. He said that as an Army veteran who served in Iraq, "I know what happens to people who have bad water. ... I had men who were hospitalized for a week because they were getting ice from locals from water in the Tigris River."

Mendoza said he recognizes how important water is from his years working in agriculture and manufacturing. He said any water bond in California needs to address both water storage and water policy "that allows for a consistent flow of water (for agriculture) 365 days a year," as well as water quality in rural communities. He criticized endangered-species laws and other policies "that dump water into the ocean."

"We shouldn't have to share our water with fish," Thomas said. "We need water here to irrigate our farmland." Thomas said he welcomes a vote on a water bond to build more reservoirs to store runoff from winter storms in the Sierra Nevada. "We can't manufacture more water or make it rain, but we can conserve as much as possible."

Jobs and education

The issues of jobs and education were linked by many of the candidates, although some emphasized decreasing taxes and regulatory burdens on business and others focused on the importance of restoring state money for vocational training in high schools.

"How can you get better paying jobs if you don't have the education?" Andres said. "There has to be education to convert this valley into a very good job place for the people." She said that the state should work to make college more affordable, rather than "choking" students with high tuition and crushing loan debt.

Macareno said that for companies to bring good-paying jobs to the Valley, "I'd like to see more vocational programs to educate workers for a changing workforce in a global economy." He also advocated providing seed money to explore development of a four-year state university in Tulare or Kings County.

Barajas said that in addition to more money for vocational training, she wants to remove corporate taxes for business owners to attract investment from other states instead of "driving businesses out of the state."

Likewise, Mathis and Mendoza both said small businesses need relief from taxes, minimum-wage proposals and Obamacare. Both also backed improvements in vocational education, and Mendoza chimed in that fewer strings are needed on state money for local school districts.

"Government needs to get the heck out of the way," Mendoza said. "I've been a business owner and run a company. ... When employers are doing well, and not have to shell out money in taxes, it frees them up to expand the business, hire more people or pay better wages."

Mathis also said he backs incentives for small businesses, as well as more infrastructure investments including highway and road improvements to improve the movement of agricultural and manufactured goods to ports.

Thomas applauded Gov. Jerry Brown for signing recent legislation that he said provides incentives for businesses to come into California, including sales tax relief for businesses in areas of high unemployment or poverty. He said he wants to work with local elected leaders to understand their desires for local business incentives, as well as improve money for vocational training.

High-speed rail

The hot-button issue of high-speed rail, which would run through the San Joaquin Valley, has been a source of partisan division in Sacramento. It also divides the 26th District candidates.

Jones and Macareno are in favor of it. Andres and Thomas support it, but with reservations over its costs and effects on agriculture. Barajas, Mathis and Mendoza all oppose it.

"Right now it's approved; it's a good idea," Andres said. "But we really need to be innovative and use it accordingly, and not destroy the environment."

Thomas said "it would be nice if they could build it parallel to Highway 99 instead of through the heart of agriculture," he said. He also expressed concern over the \$68 billion cost of the system, and said the project should be put on hold until the state solves its water problems.

Macareno said high-speed rail "is part of a vision for the future, aside from the fact that it will bring jobs." But, he added, "I realize it's not a perfect project, it needs a lot of work, but I think there are more pros than cons" from long-range environmental and transportation benefits.

Barajas said she thinks the bullet train "is a money pit" and that she is "absolutely against it ... and I would do everything in my power to ... have a re-vote."

Mathis said that while he thinks the "concept of high-speed rail is great," the state has more pressing priorities for such a large amount of money — including improving highways and infrastructure for freight movement around the state instead of passengers. He also doubts the state's projections for the system's cost, ridership and electricity demands.

Mendoza said that "Californians want a revote and they want their money back" on the bullet-train system. "High-speed rail has been shoved down the throats of California since day one. ... It doesn't pencil out, and the government is doing every trick in the book to take productive land away from farmers and businesses."

TERESITA "TESS" ANDRES

Age: 61

Residence: Visalia

Occupation: Homecare independent contractor

Education: Bachelor's degree, Grandview College, Philippines

Family: Married, three grown children

Party: Republican

Web: www.tessandresforstateassembly.com/

Facebook: www.facebook.com/pages/Teresita-Tess-Andres/811245635555939

ESTHER BARAJAS

Age: 35

Residence: Visalia

Occupation: Insurance broker

Education: Attended the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising, San Diego

Family: n/a

Party: Republican

Web: www.estherbarajas.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/TheEstherBarajas/

Twitter: @EstherBarajasCA

CARLTON JONES

Age: 40

Residence: Tulare

Occupation: Firefighter; Tulare City Council member

Education: attended California State University, Sacramento

Family: married; eight children ages 3 to 21

Party: Democratic

Web: www.electcarltonjones.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/electcarltonjones/

RUBEN MACARENO

Age: 50

Residence: Visalia

Occupation: Publisher

Education: attended California State University, Los Angeles

Family: Married; two sons, ages 17 and 26

Party: Democratic

Web: www.macareno2014.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/ruben.macareno/

DEVON MATHIS

Age: 31

Residence: Visalia

Occupation: Veterans advocate

Education: Bachelor's degree in public administration, California State University, Fresno

Family: Engaged; four sons ages 3 to 8

Party: Republican

Web: www.devonmathis.com

Facebook: www.facebook.com/mathisforassembly/

RUDY MENDOZA

Age: 39

Residence: Woodlake

Occupation: Woodlake mayor; district director for Rep. Devin Nunes

Education: Woodlake High School

Family: Married; three children ages 7 to 16

Party: Republican

Web: www.mendozaforassembly.com/

Facebook: www.facebook.com/MendozaForAssembly2014/

Twitter: @TeamRudy2014

DEREK THOMAS

Age: 49

Residence: Tulare

Occupation: Correctional officer

Education: High school graduate

Family: Married; two grown children

Party: Democratic

Web: www.votederekthomas.com/

Facebook: www.facebook.com/DThomasSAD26

Incumbent: Connie Conway, R-Visalia (termed out)

Area: Most of Tulare County, all of Inyo County, part of Kern County.

Voter registration:

Republican: 68,564, 45.7%

Democrat: 47,609, 31.7%

American Independent: 5,386, 3.6%

Libertarian: 871, 0.6%

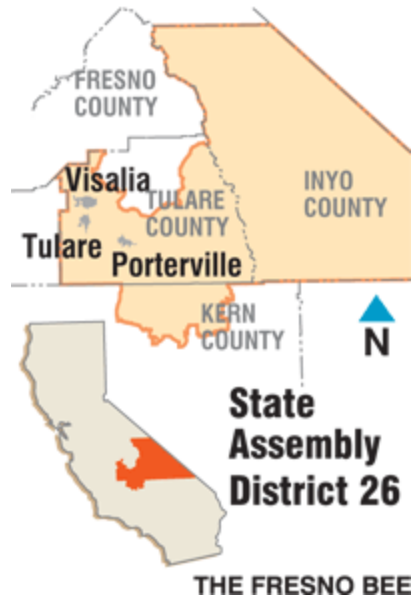
Green: 541, 0.4%

Peace & Freedom: 457, 0.3%

Americans Elect: 24, 0.02%

Other: 295, 0.2%

No party preference: 26,462, 17.6%



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