

Intense campaigning in District 1 and 7 council races

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The June 3 primary is just three weeks away. That's no doubt why things are heating up in several Fresno City Council races.

Here are a few of the happenings:

* District 1 candidate Esmeralda Soria said she's launching an "aggressive grassroots campaign" to reach voters. A key part of the campaign is called "Soria Sidewalk Hours."

Her plan: Get outdoors, talk to voters in their neighborhoods, listen to their concerns, chat a bit about her plans for City Hall.

"The community members I've had the pleasure of speaking with during my Soria Sidewalk Hours have reinvigorated me and given me a valuable perspective on the issues important to the families in our community," Soria said. "I won't be outworked in this campaign and I am reaching out to voters in every way that I can. The answers to our challenges that face our city are not found at City Hall, they are found in our neighborhoods by those who call Fresno our home."

According to a news release, Soria held a "sidewalk hour" from 7:30 a.m. to 8:30 a.m. Tuesday at Shaw and Polk avenues.

Next up: Shields Avenue and Van Ness Boulevard, 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. on Friday, May 16.

* I dropped by the business office of District 1 candidate Rama Dawar last week. It's on West Avenue, near Cornell Ave.

Dawar says his campaign is doing well. But, he added, he's angry for two reasons.

First, he says someone is destroying his campaign signs. He says his signs are burned or thrown on the ground. We went for a short walk on West. We found one of his signs in the gutter.

Dawar says he doesn't know who's responsible.

Second, Dawar says someone (he doesn't know who) filed a complaint with the city's Code Enforcement Division. The complaint: Dawar topped a couple of security fences at his office with barbed wire but failed to get a permit.

Dawar says he has spent thousands of dollars replacing copper wire in his air conditioning unit. The bills got so high (they date back to early 2013) that he finally put a fence around his rooftop AC and topped the fence with barbed wire.

He did the same with his existing fence around the office parking lot.

Barbed-wire atop a fence is OK if you get a permit from City Hall. Dawar says he didn't have a permit (cost: \$454), but now is getting one. He says no one complained until he started running an aggressive campaign for the District 1 seat.

"I feel it is a dirty trick because I am running for office," Dawar says. "No one came in '13. No one came in '14 until I started my campaign. Someone is asking the city to take an action. That someone is a powerful person."

Dawar says copper theft from business ACs is getting worse in District 1.

"When I am in office, I will make sure businesses are protected," Dawar said.

Mark Standriff, the city's director of communications, says no one is targeting Dawar.

"We deal with hundreds of complaints a week," Standriff says. "Our only concern is what's the issue and how to fix it. To paraphrase Sigmund Freud, sometimes a citation is just a citation."

* About 30 people gathered on the sidewalk in front of the old Mervyn's building at Blackstone and Ashlan avenues on Tuesday morning.

Their message: District 7 incumbent Clint Olivier is "bad news for Fresno." They say they are embarking on a three-week "neighborhood accountability" campaign, with Olivier as the focus.

Three people spoke. It was hard to hear them because of the traffic and nearby construction. The old Mervyn's building is being turned into a Walmart Supercenter.

These were the group's main criticism:

- 1.) Olivier, they said, is against good-paying jobs because of his votes on trash privatization, high-speed rail and Bus Rapid Transit.
- 2.) He's against good-paying jobs because he supports the Walmart Supercenter, which could harm nearby businesses.
- 3.) His campaign is generously funded by business interests.

"He's happy to cheer-lead Walmart but he's not happy to cheer-lead Bus Rapid Transit," said group spokesman Dillon Savory.

In a news release, Chuck Riojas said: "Bus Rapid Transit and High Speed Rail bring federal dollars into our community. These projects promise to create living wage jobs and directly impact the residents of District 7."

Olivier in the past has spoken at length about his key votes. For example, he said the trash privatization votes were about maintaining public safety services when money was tight. He said the old Mervyn's store (when empty) was blight on a high-profile District 7 corner. He said he helped reform the Bus Rapid Transit plan so it could get through a skeptical City Council, thus transforming rather than harming Fresno's mass transit system.

James Scoggins, vice president of the city's firefighters' union, praised Olivier in a telephone interview on Tuesday. He said the union views Olivier as a "longstanding supporter" of job-creation efforts. He said the union board voted unanimously to endorse Olivier.

Said Scoggins: "He will continue to work hard for working families in District 7 and throughout Fresno, and for the fire service."