

Asadoorian won't seek third term on Fresno Unified school board

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Hannah Furfaro

Fresno Unified School District trustee Michelle Asadoorian said Tuesday she will not seek a third term in November, in part because she believes school board members should serve a limited number of terms.

The northwest Fresno trustee and former board president says she'll look for another full-time job, possibly in education, and may use some of her time to help revive a movement to split the district in two, a plan pitched within the past few years that never gained much traction.

"It has been the greatest honor," Asadoorian said of her time on the board. "It has been the most humbling experience I've ever had."

Asadoorian, 55, told The Bee her decision on Tuesday, and also announced she'll support Brooke Ashjian as a candidate for her seat. Ashjian is a northwest Fresno businessman whose family has had roots in the Valley for a century. He declined to comment Tuesday.

She's leaving the position after eight years, which included a brief stint as board president and a long-fought battle to secure better school facilities in the Bullard High area and across the district. She originally intended to serve one term, she said, but won a second term after getting support from parents in her region.

The longtime Fresno resident and former teacher became a stalwart for transparency during her terms, locking horns with her colleagues and Superintendent Michael Hanson over several issues, including access to receipts paid to outside attorneys each year.

In 2012, she spearheaded a probe into former board president Tony Vang's residency, partnering with former trustee Larry Moore to call for a formal investigation over whether Vang lived in the east-central Fresno area he was elected to represent. The next year, Asadoorian supported a plan to revoke the charter for New Millennium, an embattled charter school in southwest Fresno.

In recent years, she's been somewhat of a lone wolf, casting the only "no" votes against big-ticket items like the district's annual budget and a \$200,000 back-pay agreement with Hanson last summer.

"I've tried to raise the level of awareness, and that's all I can do as one board member," she said.

Board President Valerie Davis was surprised to hear Asadoorian's decision and thanked her for her service.

"We truly appreciate her time and dedication to our students," she said.

Hanson did not immediately return phone messages left by The Bee.

Asadoorian has become known for championing building projects in the Bullard High area, but said getting projects underway was often frustrating. Parents have long expected construction upgrades and expanded programs for high-achieving students in her neighborhood -- two measures Asadoorian says were often relegated to the back burner of the board's agenda.

Those types of bureaucratic headaches are part of the reason she wants to help rekindle a push to split Fresno Unified into two districts, a concept promoted by two separate groups just a few years ago.

A 2012 attempt fizzled when a group called Reform Fresno Unified proposed splitting the district along Blackstone Avenue. Just a year earlier, a collection of Bullard High parents that organized under the moniker Bullard Pride pushed unsuccessfully to create a separate district with the Fresno High area.

At that time, Trustee Carol Mills said Tuesday, "my community resoundingly indicated they were not interested in doing that." Mills said she's unaware of any change since.

The idea dates back even further: a report commissioned about 16 years ago by the late Pete Mehas, former Fresno County schools superintendent, recommended breaking up the district's boundaries. The report showed Fresno Unified's size encumbers its ability to serve students effectively.

A split wouldn't be easy. First, supporters would need to gather signatures from 25% of voters in the area that wants to cut away, or 10% of voters across the district, said Larry Shirey, field representative with the California Department of Education. Then, the petition would go through a verification process. A county committee would hold public hearings and decide if the plan meets strict state requirements, which include demographic diversity and equal facilities. If the district opposed the plan, it would head to the state Board of Education for approval.

"It's not rare for a district to attempt to split. It's rare it gets through all the stages of approval," Shirey said.

Even so, Asadoorian said, there's a new movement afoot to draw up partition plans. She said she has limited knowledge of the proposal, but a demographer has been hired to evaluate how the split would unfold.

She made it clear that she's not leaving her seat to take up the cause and emphasized she'll spend most of her time searching for a new job.

"I'm not directly involved with that movement, but I support the efforts of that movement," she said. "I think I will get more involved in that effort once it takes hold in our city."

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