

Ashjian to seek Asadoorian's Fresno Unified board seat

 fresnobee.com/2014/06/18/3984643/ashjian-to-seek-asadoorians-fresno.html

By Brianna Vaccari

Brooke Ashjian is expected to formally announce his candidacy Thursday for Fresno Unified trustee Michelle Asadoorian's seat with some big-name endorsers by his side.

Fresno police Chief Jerry Dyer, District Attorney-elect Lisa Smittcamp and incumbent Area 7 trustee Michelle Asadoorian will speak during the 11 a.m. event at Bullard High School near the track field and baseball diamonds.

Asadoorian announced Tuesday she will not seek a third term in November and that she will support Ashjian as a candidate for her seat.

Ashjian owns various businesses in the city, including Seal Rite Paving & Grading, residential housing, farming and storage businesses. He was born in Fresno but moved to Bakersfield for a short time, returning to attend Fresno City College and later Fresno State.

He has been married to his wife Gina for 25 years and has four children who attended Gibson Elementary, Tenaya Middle and Bullard High School. His youngest daughter will be a sophomore at Bullard in the fall.

So far, no one else has announced plans to run for the seat.

In an interview, Ashjian said if elected he hopes to tackle drop-out rates, closing the achievement gap and providing more vocational programs in Fresno Unified.

"We have a bar that has been set for the district for what we think achievement status is," he said. "I don't think we should raise the bar. I think we should clear the bar."

One way to do this is by keeping kids in school and implementing the School Attendance Review Board, he said. The SARB process requires a truant student to meet with parents and school officials, and if the problem continues the issue gets taken up with the superintendent, law enforcement and health and welfare agencies.

The program is one Smittcamp believes in and promised to be involved in, Ashjian said.

"These kids need to be in school," he said. "If you look at the demographics of the dropouts, the dropout demographics of Fresno Unified School District by race almost match the demographics at the jail."

"It's a terrible, terrible tragedy."

It will take time to learn what Fresno Unified's biggest challenges and needs are, he said, but safety and discipline are issues that should be addressed.

Ashjian also noted the school board's tendency to vote on issues 6-1, with Asadoorian's vote being the only "no" vote on major items.

"The cohesiveness is probably not there on the board, and I think I bring cohesiveness," he said.

When it came to subdividing Fresno Unified, Ashjian said he needs to "peel back the layers" of the issue and that he will be on a learning curve.

Splitting Fresno Unified is an idea Asadoorian supports, but Ashjian said there is just not enough information about it to support or oppose it.

"Without seeing the numbers and without seeing the data, I think it's way too premature even to think about a decision," he said.

Ashjian feels it's his responsibility to serve on the board because Fresno has been good to him, but added, "We can do better. We can try harder. Our city deserves more."

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