

A fresh GOP voice from the San Joaquin Valley

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LocalCalifornia Politics

The San Joaquin Valley may be struggling to grow food because of the dust-bowling drought. But it's having no trouble producing Republican leaders.

OK, that's a non sequitur. But maybe not so much.

The latest Republican leader to emerge from the San Joaquin is Assemblywoman Kristin Olsen of Modesto, a conservative with an appealing moderate tone, who nevertheless has strong views about water development.

She isn't easily pigeonholed. Unlike some valley Republicans, Olsen is adamantly opposed — as are many environmentalists — to Gov. Jerry Brown's obsessive effort to dig two massive water tunnels under the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta.

The \$25-billion project would siphon fresh Sacramento River water before it flows through the delta and dump it into aqueducts headed south into farm fields and cities.

"The tunnel project will be devastating to farmers, families and businesses in and around the delta," says Olsen, 40, who will become the Assembly minority leader in November. Until then, she'll be a "full and equal partner" — a co-leader? — with termed-out GOP head Connie Conway of Tulare, another valley town.

"We need to come up with water solutions that bring various regions of the state together and put a stop to pitting regions against each other."

Olsen doesn't represent the delta, but her Assembly district bumps up against its southern edge in San Joaquin County. "Residents there consider the delta their home," she says. If Olsen ever decides to seek a state Senate seat, however, she'll have to run in the delta.

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Olsen says the Brown administration has acknowledged that the tunnels "wouldn't deliver a single drop of additional water to any part of California." (It asserts the project's purpose is to make water deliveries more reliable.)

"That doesn't make sense to me to spend anywhere from \$25 billion to \$67 billion" — including interest on bonds — "for a project that isn't going to increase water supply," the leader-elect says.

She's advocating other solutions: reservoirs, desalination, recycling, storm water capturing, aquifer cleanup — with an emphasis on local.

And to help pay for such projects, Olsen is pressing, as are many Democrats, for a "tunnel-neutral" water bond proposal. The Legislature must pass the bond by mid-August to get it on the November ballot.

"Almost everyone," she says, "agrees that the bond cannot in any way facilitate the tunnels if you want it to pass the ballot."

Well, not quite everyone. Some big water agencies that GOP lawmakers look to for voting cues are fantasizing that a pro-tunnel bond could pass. It's not clear what Brown thinks.

Olsen lines up with all GOP lawmakers on another Brown obsession: his \$68-billion bullet train project. She's dead set against it.

"There's no question California needs to improve its mass transportation," she says, "but high-speed rail, as currently proposed, is not the answer.

"There's still not a business plan to show that it will ever be viable and have the ridership, starting between Bakersfield and Madera, to get significant numbers of people out of their vehicles. The sooner the state of California abandons the current high-speed rail, the better. What we really should be investing in is regional rail."

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She advocates expanding train service from the Bay Area to Stockton and down into the San Joaquin Valley "at a fraction of the cost of high-speed rail."

"That would be a tremendous opportunity to get commuters out of their cars while creating great jobs," she says. "Also expanding rail travel from L.A. to San Diego would make a lot more sense."

Olsen — articulate, attractive, ambitious — seems to represent the wave of the future for California Republicans if they're to reverse their downward spiral and reestablish relevancy in Sacramento.

She also can be aggressive. Last year, Olsen failed in a coup attempt against Conway and was banished to one of the Assembly's smallest offices.

She's a soccer mom who spends only one or two nights a week in the capital and commutes home the rest, although that will be hard to continue when she becomes leader.

"It will be a balancing act," she says, "but I want to show other young moms and young girls that we can do anything we set our minds to do."

Says Barbara O'Connor, a Democrat and former director of the Institute for the Study of Politics and Media at Cal State Sacramento: "She is bright, non-ideological, works hard, does her homework and is very wholesome."

O'Connor adds: "It's very interesting that the future of the Republican Party seems to be based on bright women from the Central Valley." She's referring also to Fresno Mayor Ashley Swarengin, running for state controller.

But San Joaquin Valley males also have risen to GOP legislative leadership in recent years: Dave Cogdill, Mike Villines and Kevin McCarthy, recently elected U.S. House majority leader.

Olsen is a social conservative — opposes abortion rights and same-sex marriage — but doesn't focus on those divisive issues. "I'm going to prioritize Republican core principles," she says. "Lower taxes, good jobs and great schools."

She's not an anti-tax knee-jerk. Two years ago, she refused to renew a no-tax pledge peddled by conservative Washington-based political intimidator Grover Norquist. "Our pledge should be to our constituents alone," she says. "Not to people thousands of miles away."

For many moderate Democrats and independents, Olsen may seem a non-threatening conservative. She

went to college on a music scholarship and keeps a keyboard in her office for stress relief, is a former Cal State Stanislaus flack and a Modesto City Council member.

She'll be leader for only two years, then booted by term limits. In the meantime, she could put a happy face on the GOP and help devise a practical solution to California's water woes.

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