

New rules could bar commissioner from First 5 Fresno County board

By Marc Benjamin

Fresno County Supervisor Phil Larson wanted his candidate named to the revised Fresno County Children & Families Commission, the agency that oversees First 5 Fresno County.

Under the revisions Larson and other supervisors voted for in July, the commission shrank from nine to seven members and conflict of interest regulations were strengthened.

But Tuesday morning he learned those changes may disqualify his commission nominee, Firebaugh physician Marcia Sablan. She has served on the First 5 board for seven years; her husband, Oscar Sablan, serves as a Firebaugh-Las Deltas school board member. Since the school district gets funding through First 5, Marcia Sablan could be disqualified under the new rules, which prohibit a commissioner from serving if a family member is connected to an agency that gets First 5 funding.

Larson said he wanted to shrink the commission and wasn't considering the conflict of interest rule changes.

On Tuesday afternoon, supervisors approved Marcia Sablan's nomination, pending her filing a "supplemental questionnaire" that will be used to affirm appointees. The nomination of Hugo Morales by Supervisor Henry R. Perea also was approved pending his completion of the questionnaire. Morales has been on the commission for 10 years.

Under the new rules, four open commission seats are split east and west of Highway 99. Three remaining seats are filled by a county supervisor and two county department heads. The new commission's first meeting is in October.

Sablan is the only nominee west of Highway 99. Morales is one of two nominees east of Highway 99. The second nominee, identified as Shannon Koontz, a Pacific Gas & Electric employee, has not yet filled out all necessary paperwork, county officials said.

The rules were changed in July after a lengthy feud between county supervisors and the former executive director of First 5, Kendra Rogers, and the commission members who supported her. The feud intensified when supervisors Larson, Debbie Poochigian and Judy Case McNairy opposed construction of a \$15 million downtown Fresno building to house the agency's headquarters.

They also were critical of First 5 because only 25% of its 7,700 "intensively served" clients are in rural areas. Larson, Case McNairy and Poochigian say rural areas are underserved.

Rogers' problems with supervisors deepened earlier this year when she and Perea had a disagreement over an invitation sent to Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin for the building's groundbreaking. Rogers resigned from First 5 in July.

Board Chairman Andreas Borgeas said he favored the state conflict of interest guideline when he voted against the new rules in July. He said the new county rules resulted in a higher level of scrutiny for the Children & Families Commission than any other Fresno County commission.

Those rules, he said, will result in fewer capable commission applicants, depriving the organization of members with institutional knowledge and experience.

Supervisors voted to extend the application period until Friday.

Perea said he is interested in seeing if other west side commission applicants surface. If Sablan is unable to serve and no other west side residents apply, Perea said he could consider rule changes to allow commission members to declare a potential conflict of interest and recuse themselves from voting on specific items.

Sablan and two other board members were expected to lose their seats because of the new rules. Michael Berg, the Central Unified superintendent who served for the past 18 months, resigned at the last commission meeting. Lisa Nichols, a Fresno Unified School District counselor, also will lose her commission post.

First 5 Fresno County is an independent agency that seeks to bolster health and education programs for children from birth to age 5 and their families. It's funded by California's tobacco tax and has a budget this year of around \$11 million.

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6166, mberjamin@fresnobee.com or [@beebebenjamin](https://twitter.com/beebebenjamin) on Twitter.

Copyright

© 2014 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>