

Pacheco, Xiong supervisor race will be expensive, tight

By Marc Benjamin

Brian Pacheco SPECIAL TO THE FRESNO BEE

Only eight votes separated Blong Xiong and Brian Pacheco in June's primary election for Fresno County supervisor in District 1.

The seat is being vacated by Phil Larson, who has served 12 years on the board. During the hard-fought primary, Xiong's and Pacheco's campaign funds combined to total nearly \$700,000, and the spending is starting to pick up for the November election.

Since the beginning of August, the two candidates are nearly even in fundraising, tallying a combined total of \$165,000 with six weeks left before the election, likely putting a price tag on the seat at more than \$1 million.

The district has more city of Fresno voters than county and includes parts of Fresno's northwest side, Mendota, Firebaugh, San Joaquin and Kerman along with 11 Fresno County unincorporated communities.

The race will test Xiong's union-backed coalition against Pacheco's significant agricultural support.

Pacheco, 46, a Kerman farmer, led after primary election night, but Xiong won a narrow victory after the final votes were tallied a few weeks later. Higher turnout is expected for the November election, which experts say could help tilt the election toward Xiong because a majority of the district is in city areas.

But the winner may not be known until weeks after the November election, said Jeff Cummins, a Fresno State assistant professor of political science.

"It's so tough to call," he said. "I think this one will come down to the wire just like the primary."

Based on primary voting numbers and the traditional belief that there is lower turnout for Democrats, Cummins said, he would give Xiong the edge because the district is skewed more to urban Fresno.

Pacheco, also a registered Democrat, has the support of three Republican supervisors and the third-place finisher, Kerman Mayor Gary Yep, a Republican.

Cummins said Yep's endorsement helps Pacheco because Yep got more than 15% of the primary vote.

"It could give Pacheco a boost, but it really comes back to turnout," he said.

At stake is a three-vote majority on the Board of Supervisors. The departures of Larson and Judy Case McNairy, both conservatives, could lead to a change in the political dynamic of the board. Larson and Case McNairy support Pacheco, as does Supervisor Debbie Pochigian, the third reliable conservative vote.

But while Pacheco appreciates the endorsements, he insists that they will not sway his votes as a supervisor.

"I will make an independent decision based on what I believe is in the best interest of District 1 and the county as a whole," he said.



Pacheco said he was bothered by a late flurry of negative advertising in the primary by the Service Employees International Union, the county's largest union, that questioned his independence. While he did not fight back with negative ads against Xiong in June, he said he won't hesitate to "defend myself and not let my record be distorted" for the November election if the union does it again.

But Pacheco also said he will not let an ad campaign taint his feelings about county employees and their representatives.

He said he has union backing from people who know him best, the teachers and classified employees in Kerman Unified School District where he has served as a board member for 12 years. He also serves on the Community Medical Centers board of trustees.

"I have never given management a raise that was not equal to the working people in the district," he said.

Both candidates discount their conventionally perceived political weaknesses.

Pacheco said he has spent significant time walking in Fresno precincts and talking to Xiong's constituents and claims to be making some inroads.

And Xiong, 44, said he will be a strong voice of agriculture since he is a first-generation Hmong-American and has many friends and relatives who are farmers.

Xiong said that his endorsements cross party lines, too. He is endorsed by fellow City Council Member Lee Brand, a Republican. He also has the backing of former Fresno County Supervisor Susan Anderson, a Republican.

He said he has no control over union-backed independent commercials that frustrated Pacheco and wasn't asked about the content because candidates are "supposed to keep those things separate."

And while Pacheco said he will work with unions, Xiong said his track record shows that he is not going to be in the pocket of organized labor and pointed out he voted against city labor unions when it was in the best interest of the city.

He said he is better prepared to tackle hard issues after serving eight years as a Fresno City Council member — a city with half the county's population and a billion-dollar budget. Xiong said he has made tough decisions, especially during the recession.

"There have been nothing but difficult decisions the past five or six years," he said.

BRIAN PACHECO

Age: 46

Residence: Kerman

Occupation: Farmer

Education: B.S. in Ag Economics, University of California at Davis

Family: Married, three children.

Web:

www.pachecoforsupervisor.com

BLONG XIONG

Age: 44

Residence: Fresno

Education: B.S., Marian College; MBA, National University

Occupation: (Prior) deputy director, Fresno Center for New Americans

Family: Married.

Web:

www.blongforsupervisor.com

Facebook/Social media: www.facebook.com/BlongforSupervisor

The reporter can be reached at (559) 441-6166, mbenjamin@fresnobee.com or @beebenjamin on Twitter.

Copyright

© 2014 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.

<http://www.fresnobee.com>

