

Fresno teachers union endorses Brooke Ashjian



POLITICAL NOTEBOOK

Posted by Hannah Furfaro on October 3, 2014

In a departure from past election cycles the [Fresno Teachers Association](#) union has backed only one school board candidate for the Fresno Unified races, picking newcomer Brooke Ashjian from a bundle of candidates including three incumbents.

Ashjian, who is running in the Area 7 race to replace Trustee Michelle Asadoorian, said union officials notified him of their endorsement last week.

"That tells me I've got a tremendous amount of work to do and a huge responsibility," he said Friday.

FTA President Tish Rice said the union interviewed every candidate except Ashjian's competitor, Ruben Martinez, Area 1 candidate Charles Watkins Muhammad and Trustee Christopher De La Cerda, who is running unopposed.

Ashjian was the union's only pick based on that interview and his answers to a questionnaire every candidate filled out, she said.

"(Ashjian) has met with people in the community that say he's a strong, viable candidate and he shared in his interview things he's trying to do to move the district forward," she said.

With only Ashjian on their favorites list, there's no union slate this go-around, a shift from previous years when the labor group has put up its own roster of candidates.

In 2012, the union backed three candidates, who each lost to Luis Chavez and incumbents Carol Mills and Janet Ryan, despite a \$10,000 donation for each challenger from the union's coffers. FTA didn't make any endorsements in 2010, but supported three candidates in 2008 and four in 2006.

Incumbents Valerie Davis and Cal Johnson both won support from FTA that year, but are returning to the ballot this time around without the union's vote of confidence.

Rice didn't comment on why no incumbents were endorsed, but said recent squabbles between the board and FTA over teacher contracts "wasn't even considered."

Area 3 candidate Esmeralda Diaz, who is looking to unseat Davis, has said she was initially approached by the union and asked to run, but didn't earn their endorsement when she refused to sign a commitment pledge. Rice said Ashjian signed the pledge, which asks candidates to work with FTA when making decisions that affect teachers.

Ashjian's endorsement is only his latest in a string of support from other big names, including Mayor Ashley Swearingin, Police Chief Jerry Dyer and incoming District Attorney Lisa Sondergaard Smittcamp.

The business owner said he's thankful for all his endorsements but is choosing to forgo campaign donations from FTA and business interests. Ashjian has accepted two contributions, including \$1,000 from a builders and contractors political action committee he belongs to, and \$5,000 from Brent Smittcamp, Sondergaard Smittcamp's husband.

"I want to be an independent voice," Ashjian said. "I don't want to be beholden to any developers, contractors, unions.

I want people to endorse me because they think and they believe I'm going to do the right thing. And I think FTA understands that."

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