

EDITORIAL: Bee recommends Swearengin for controller

Ashley Swearengin

SPECIAL TO THE FRESNO BEE

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearengin, the Republican candidate for state controller, has been attracting attention by ignoring the niceties of politics.

Some of what she is doing is calculated. She is, after all, running for office. Still, independent streaks are as common as rainstorms in Fresno. And in this financial watchdog role, independence from the Democratic power structure would be an asset. For that reason, and others, we endorse Swearengin.

Swearengin, 42, is running against Betty Yee, 56, to replace termed-out Controller John Chiang, a Democrat. Yee is a Democratic member of the Board of Equalization from San Francisco.



Swearengin was elected Fresno mayor, a nonpartisan position, in 2008 and reelected in 2012. As mayor of our city, which has more than 500,000 residents, Swearengin has shown she can manage a large organization in difficult circumstances.

Few cities were harder hit in the recession than Fresno. Swearengin and the City Council cut spending, clashed with public employee unions by pushing to outsource garbage collection, and avoided bankruptcy, no small feat. Fresno still struggles, though its unemployment rate has fallen to 10.1% from a high of 18.5% four years ago.

Unlike most Republican officeholders in California, Swearengin supports the proposed high-speed rail, seeing it as a way to boost the San Joaquin Valley economy. That puts her at odds with the state's most influential Republican, U.S. House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of Bakersfield, and also Republican gubernatorial nominee Neel Kashkari, who calls it the "crazy train."

California Republican Party Chairman Jim Brulte called Swearengin's refusal to endorse Kashkari at the GOP convention "felony stupid." It is just that in the cloistered world of politics, though given the GOP's tarnished brand, it might be politically astute. Still, she should get over her pique at Kashkari. Holding grudges is not an admirable trait.

Yee has a solid background. After working as a legislative aide in the 1990s, she became second in command in the state Department of Finance helping to write budgets when Gray Davis was governor. People who worked with her said she often was the voice of caution about spending decisions.

Yee became an aide to Board of Equalization member Carole Migden, then was appointed to fill the vacancy when Migden departed. She was then elected to the seat in 2006.

The controller is responsible for paying the state's bills, and has an audit role over state spending. The advent of the autopen and computers limits the duties of the office. Still, the controller sits on influential boards.

One is the Board of Equalization, which functions as a tax court, albeit one whose members are subject to intense lobbying. The board rules on disputes involving sales, property and income taxes, and its decisions can be worth tens of millions of dollars to the state, local governments and taxpayers.

The board is split, 3-2, with Democrats in the majority. Swearengin's election likely would tilt the balance toward

Republicans, depending on the outcome of the Nov. 4 election. Swearingin says she would side with taxpayers when possible, but promises to take an independent approach to decisions.

The controller also sits on the board that oversees the California Public Employees' Retirement System, the giant pension fund. In August, the CalPERS board voted 7-5 to water down the Public Employee Pension Reform Act of 2012.

The specific issue was narrow: whether extra pay given to newly hired workers for temporary promotions should count toward pensions. Gov. Jerry Brown urged a no vote.

Yee told The Sacramento Bee's editorial board that like Chiang, she would have sided with the majority. Public employee unions pushed that position. Swearingin said she would have voted against the proposal.

California must find fair ways to curb pension costs, or else more cities could go the way of Stockton by declaring bankruptcy, or, more likely, will meet the rising costs of retiree benefits by cutting services.

Democrats and their donors all but rule state politics. That's not healthy. As controller, Swearingin could provide a check on the power of one-party control, which is reason enough to support her.

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