

## Fresno Unified Area 3 candidates similar on key issues

By Hannah  
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Esmeralda Diaz SPECIAL TO THE BEE

Both candidates in the Fresno Unified Area 3 trustee race are slinging mud over professional credentials and campaign contributions, while leaving lots of room for agreement over key issues like vocational programs and how to use new state money effectively.

Incumbent Valerie Davis is being challenged by veteran candidate Esmeralda Diaz, a retired physician, for the seat that represents Sunnyside High and its feeder schools.

Davis, 55, is fighting for a third full term on the board, where she currently serves as president. The Fresno native has served on the board since 2004 and touts her record and involvement in community groups. She's lived in the neighborhood for more than 30 years and raised her three children there -- the "five-square-mile community is all I've ever known" she said during an interview this month.

By contrast, Davis said, her opponent is new to the area and lacks the community ties Davis has built over decades.

But while Diaz, 47, may be comparatively new in the area, she isn't new to the political scene. The mother of two has twice run -- and lost -- in races for the Roosevelt High-area seat. Davis has questioned Diaz's reasons for moving a few years ago into the Sunnyside district, alleging her competitor wanted a shot at a different political seat.

Diaz flatly denied the claims and said she moved to have a better home. She said she's tuned into Sunnyside voters' interests since moving: she's very active in her church and has spent hours door-knocking to get to know her neighbors.

Diaz has raised her own concerns over Davis, including her campaign contributions that come mostly from donors outside the Sunnyside area. Of 55 donations Davis has received since July, 47 came from people or companies with addresses outside Sunnyside.

That sends a clear message that Davis has to look elsewhere for support, Diaz said.

Davis' campaign treasury has benefited from her incumbency. She's brought in more than \$10,000 to Diaz's \$4,500 since July, including \$1,000-plus donations from big name business owners like Richard Spencer, owner of Harris Construction, and Bush Construction owner David Bush. She's received several small contributions from family friends, fellow board members and Fresno Unified employees.

It's no coincidence that Davis is attracting such donations, Diaz said, pointing to Davis' votes on several multimillion-dollar school construction projects awarded to Harris Construction.



“It looks bad when you give a big contract to them and they give you money for your campaign,” Diaz said. “This is the reason we need to recycle this seat. We cannot keep the same people in the same place.”

Davis was quick to counter that although she and other trustees are responsible for approving bids, district staff solicit vet and pick the best bidder.

“It is a process set up by the state of California,” Davis said. “She wouldn’t know this because she doesn’t know much about our bidding process.”

But while the candidates swap barbs over politics, neither has carved out a distinct agenda.

Both want to see a larger focus on career technical education. Both want to see new money from the state used wisely to improve schools.

But where Davis points to accomplishments during her time on the board, Diaz says the district needs improvement. Take graduation rates, which have crept from below 70% in 2009 to more than 76% in 2012. Davis is proud of the increase, but Diaz said movement is too slow and the district’s 15% dropout rate is too high.

The same goes for new state dollars meant to help the district’s most at-risk students, like English learners, low-income and foster youth. Both are pleased the district is getting extra cash, but Diaz said the community needs more oversight on how the money is spent.

The school board had its first go at spending the money this year and chose to fund a smattering of areas, including longer class days at some schools, and larger stipends for some after-school activities coaches.

So what’s the message for voters?

The day Fresno Unified puts the kids first “is the day the district is going to work better,” Diaz said.

And from Davis: “It’s about our kids, it’s about our school district, it’s about teaching effectively to all our students.”

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