

State Senate candidate Luis Chavez's school board, Fresno City Hall attendance questioned

By John Ellis and Hannah Furfaro

Luis Chavez

COURTESY PHOTO — Special to the Bee

State Senate hopeful Luis Chavez has missed a considerable amount of time from two taxpayer-funded jobs — one in education, the other in government — as he has campaigned for office the past two months.

But Chavez says he's done nothing wrong and everything has been by the book.

Chavez, a Fresno Unified School District trustee in his first term, was late to Wednesday's school board meeting, missing a board workshop that preceded the regular session, because he was campaigning in Kern County, where Gov. Jerry Brown made an appearance to rally Democrats. A few weeks ago, he missed another board meeting because he was in Sacramento for campaign activities — though school officials said they were told it was because he was sick.



He's also been on paid leave as chief of staff for Fresno City Council Member Sal Quintero — using banked vacation time — since late August.

Chavez, a Fresno Democrat, is in a pitched battle with incumbent Hanford Republican Andy Vidak for the 14th state Senate District seat, and the state GOP says he's taking advantage of the two positions to campaign.

"Apparently Luis Chavez thinks it's OK to have taxpayers pay his salary for not showing up to either of his government jobs while he's off raising millions of dollars to bankroll his campaign," said Peter DeMarco, a state Republican Party spokesman.

Chavez responded that the Republican criticism shows Vidak's campaign — and a state Republican Party trying to hold off Democrats from keeping a two-thirds majority in the state Senate — is worried about its chances in Tuesday's election.

"I think its pretty obvious — it's desperation," Chavez said.

Chavez had missed two of the past four school board meetings before his late arrival for Wednesday's meeting. Fresno Unified officials said this week that Chavez called in sick for the two meetings he missed.

But Chavez's version of events isn't so clear. He said he missed the first meeting because he was sick, but his campaign said he was in Sacramento for political events, including a meeting with Brown, when he missed the second school board meeting in October.

"I don't remember calling in sick" a second time, he said Wednesday when asked about his absences. His political consultant confirmed the trustee was in the capital for campaign activities and met with Brown during the Oct. 15 visit.

On Thursday, Chavez again clarified his reason for missing the Oct. 15 meeting. He said he was doing campaign events all day in Sacramento, but when he arrived back in Fresno, "I didn't feel that great, so I said I couldn't make it."

In all, Chavez says he's only missed three meetings since he was elected in 2012. The board typically meets twice each month.

Chavez also initially said he'd been paid for the last two board meetings he missed, but after being questioned about it by The Bee, said he'd directed district officials to cut his stipend in half for October.

Trustees earn a \$1,500 monthly stipend and are usually paid the full amount even when they skip a meeting because they're ill. Board bylaws say members will also get paid if they're absent because they have jury duty or are gone on official school district business.

This isn't the first time attendance at meetings by a Fresno Unified trustee has been an issue.

Two years ago, board attendance was raised as part of the fallout over allegations that then-McLane area trustee Tony Vang did not live in his district.

A Bee investigation found that several board members had missed multiple meetings, and had routinely been paid even when they missed those sessions.

As for Chavez's city job as Quintero's chief of staff, he said the time off was earned and that both Quintero and the city's human resources department signed off on the leave.

"That's time I have accrued," Chavez said.

The state Republican Party had earlier sent a Public Records Act request seeking information on Chavez's vacation time and his earned time off.

City officials confirmed Chavez's employment and his annual \$55,000 salary, but declined to provide information on vacation or leave time because they said it would violate Chavez's privacy.

Generally speaking, city spokesman Mark Standriff said a person in Chavez's position would accrue vacation at 15.5 hours per month — or around 23 days per year. That time can be banked for later use.

In addition, Standriff said that same person would also earn an additional 60 hours per year of personal time, known as "admin." That time does not roll over. If it isn't used in a calendar year, it is lost.

Taken together, it is around 31 days off per year.

Chavez has been Quintero's chief of staff for four years, and said Thursday that he's never used all his vacation time in a given year.

His time off during his current leave is around 10 weeks in total. He said he also took a few days during the primary election campaign. All, he said, was legally earned time, either vacation or from the current year's personal time. He plans to return to work for Quintero next Thursday.

Chavez added that he found it interesting that Vidak's campaign was looking into his time off when Vidak himself is also getting paid as a state senator while he is campaigning.

"I see him at events in Kern and Hanford, lots of time during the day," Chavez said. "How does he separate his time? Let's make sure we're equitable here."

But Vidak spokesman DeMarco said it was Chavez who is the one shirking his responsibility.

"Mr. Chavez has no problem with getting paid to miss school board meetings even though he's only been in office for a year," DeMarco said. "How can he ask voters to send him to Sacramento when he's not doing the job they elected him to do now?"

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