

State controller's race is one to remember



THE CITY BEAT

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Posted by George Hostetter on November 3, 2014

Fresno City Hall will never be the same, no matter how Mayor Ashley Swearingin does in Tuesday's state controller's election.

If Swearingin beats Betty Yee, it's a wild rush to select the next mayor.

If Swearingin loses, the next two years unfold with a chief executive whose powerful ambition for higher office is no secret.

Either way, hard-nosed politics figures to reign at City Hall. Think Measure G campaign intensity 24/7 for 24 months.

Here are a handful of thoughts on events:

1.) Swearingin focused her controller campaign in large part on her successful efforts to pull Fresno from the brink of bankruptcy. Makes sense. Controller is the state's chief fiscal officer.

But I always thought her best campaign weapon would have been downtown's four homeless encampments. Remember them? There were big, ugly, frightening camps in Old Germantown, across from the Poverello House, along H Street south of Ventura Avenue and next to an irrigation canal near H and Palm Avenue.

Dozens, sometimes hundreds, of people lived in each of these camps. The camps are now gone.

It's impossible now for Fresnans to fully fathom what we went through. Our downtown was bracketed by lawless camps of a nature usually seen only in war-ravaged regions.

These camps existed in the midst of our urban center for one simple reason. Powerful homeless "advocates" wanted the camps to survive (and expand) for political reasons. These "advocates" had the courts on their side. This was because the courts, constantly testing who was the strong horse in the contest, viewed City Hall as isolated and weak. Therefore, the courts sided with the "advocates," making it impossible for City Hall to maintain social order.

It took a few years, but Swearingin built an alliance. This alliance believed in the "housing first" model for the homeless. This alliance came to include the wholehearted support of President Obama's administration. This alliance proved to be the new strong horse. The courts got the drift. The camps were removed and they stay removed.

No amount of cars along Fulton Corridor, no amount of entertainment venues in Uptown, no amount of hustle and bustle next to a high-speed train station can be as important to downtown's health than the permanent removal of those homeless camps and the unstated (though tardy) acceptance of judges that the camps were travesty to the American experiment.

Brilliant certified public accountants are dime a dozen. California controller is first and foremost a political job. It takes someone who can build alliances and endure the harsh fallout in the wake of tough decisions. I don't know if Betty Yee as mayor of Fresno could have rid downtown of those four camps. I know Swearingin did it.

2.) Swearingin on Monday told me she probably would resign on the first Tuesday in January (Jan. 6) if she is electec

controller. The City Council most likely wouldn't meet until Thursday, Jan. 8 to elect a new council president.

Steve Brandau (District 2) is the current council president. Oliver Baines (District 3) is next in line to get the one-year job.

The city charter says the council president steps in as temporary mayor should there be a vacancy in the chief executive's office. A special mayoral election would follow.

We might have Mayor Brandau for a few days, then Mayor Baines for a few months. The special election might result in a Mayor Brand.

Enough of these B's.

3.) Swearingin on Monday said running for statewide office was something to remember.

"It's kind of like childbirth -- after it's all over, you forget the pain," she said. "At this stage, the campaign has been very worthwhile."

4.) Win, lose or draw, Swearingin said, she will be busy for the rest of November and into December with City Hall business.

Fulton Corridor and the 2035 general plan are priorities, she said.

"There will be a lot to do."

5.) Swearingin said she has no plans over the next two years to seek another job (such as an appointment in Washington, D.C.) if she loses on Tuesday.

About 45% of California's registered voters are Democrats (such as Yee). About 30% are Republicans (such as Swearingin). That kind of difference makes California a one-party state.

If Swearingin falls short on Tuesday, but it's close, I wonder if she becomes seen as an asset by the powerful at the national level looking for bi-partisan representation.

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