

Mendes, Pacheco winning big in early returns for Fresno County supervisors' seats

By Marc Benjamin

Buddy Mendes and Brian Pacheco were leading as election returns rolled in Tuesday night in the races to fill two seats on the Fresno County Board of Supervisors.

With 97.6% of precincts reporting in the District 4 race, Mendes had 62.4% of the vote and Daniel Parra, a Fowler City Council member, had 37.4%.

Pacheco was leading with 94.3% of the precincts reporting in District 1. He had 59% of the vote and Fresno City Council Member Blong Xiong had 40.8%.

Mendes said he felt good about the returns and said he was ready to move into "a transition" to become a county supervisor: "I think this is a great night."

But Parra wasn't giving up. He said he expected to be down after the absentee votes were counted, but said Mendes was under the number he initially projected.

"I knew he'd be higher than me because the people who follow him are absentee voters," Parra said.

Xiong held out hope as the night wore on because the city of Fresno precincts were slow to come in.

"It's a gap to overcome, but we're waiting for the city to come in," Xiong said. "That's where a majority of the voters are and that's where a majority of our voters are."

Pacheco said he was confident of a win.

"With two candidates, the voters had a clear choice as to who they wanted," Pacheco said. "I think the voters saw the distinctions between the two of us."

At stake is a three-vote majority on the Board of Supervisors. The departures of Phil Larson and Judy Case McNairy, both conservatives, could lead to a change in the political dynamic of the board. Larson and Case McNairy support Pacheco, as does Supervisor Debbie Poochigian, the third reliable conservative vote.

Mendes, a 58-year-old Riverdale farmer, nearly won the election outright in June, missing by 243 votes. That deficit meant the November election was going to be an uphill climb for Parra, 49, who is supported by the board's lone Democrat, Supervisor Henry R. Perea. During the campaign, Mendes outraised Parra 4-to-1.

Mendes said he wants to improve relationships with county workers and upgrade county roads. Water is an issue Mendes touts as an area of expertise since he farms 1,800 acres of Pima and Acala cotton, wheat, alfalfa and some pistachios across two irrigation districts.

Case McNairy, who endorsed Mendes, is retiring after 16 years on the board. Mendes also was endorsed by supervisors Larson, Andreas Borgeas and Sheriff Margaret Mims. The district contains nine of Fresno County's 15 cities and stretches more than 100 miles from Coalinga to Orange Cove. Mendes, a board member with the Riverdale Joint Unified School District board, Riverdale Public Utilities District and Southwest Transportation Agency, said his multiple government agency background made him the better candidate.

While Mendes did not have union support in his fundraising efforts, he said the county's largest union, Service

Employees International Union, represents workers in the Riverdale Unified School District where he earned a reputation for fairness among employees. He said unions didn't endorse him because he didn't sign pledges.

Only eight votes separated Fresno City Council Member Xiong and Pacheco, a Kerman Unified School trustee, in June's primary election for Fresno County supervisor. The seat was vacated by Larson, who served 12 years on the board. During the election, Xiong and Pacheco campaign war chests combined to total more than \$1.2 million, very closely split.

The district has more city of Fresno voters than county and includes parts of Fresno's northwest side, Mendota, Firebaugh, San Joaquin and Kerman along with 11 Fresno County unincorporated communities. The race tested Xiong's union-backed coalition against Pacheco's significant agricultural support.

Pacheco, 46, led after primary election night, but Xiong won after the final votes were tallied a few weeks later.

Both men are Democrats, but Pacheco also had endorsements of three Republican supervisors and the third-place finisher, Kerman Mayor Gary Yep, a Republican. Yep got more than 15% of the primary vote. In addition to serving on the Kerman school board for 12 years, Pacheco also serves on the Community Medical Centers board of trustees.

Xiong, 44, said that his endorsements crossed party lines, too. He was endorsed by Mayor Ashley Swearengin and fellow City Council Member Lee Brand, both Republicans. He also has the backing of former Fresno County Supervisor Susan Anderson, a Republican.

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