

## Catalano, Soria wait for last ballots to be counted in Fresno City Council race

It's hurry-up-and-wait time for two candidates fighting for the Fresno City Council District 1 seat.

A mere 20 votes separate Cary Catalano and Esmeralda Soria in their campaign to replace the termed-out Blong Xiong.

With all 37 precincts reporting, Catalano has 3,803 votes, Soria 3,783.

Fresno County Clerk Brandi Orth said about 32,500 late absentee ballots and 10,100 provisional ballots from across the county remain to be counted. It was unclear on Wednesday, just hours after Tuesday's election, how many of those ballots come from District 1. For example, a District 1 voter might have turned in her absentee ballot at a polling site elsewhere in the county. It takes time to get everything in order, Orth said. But it's not a stretch to assume hundreds of District 1 votes remained to be tallied.

Orth said workers began processing absentee ballots on Wednesday. She said she hopes to be through most of the absentees by the end of Friday. She will give an updated count at 3 p.m. Friday.

Orth said additional updates will be given on Nov. 12 and Nov. 14.

The processing of late absentees is being done at a county site near the fairgrounds in southeast Fresno. Susan Good representing Catalano and Christine Conley representing Soria were there Wednesday as observers.

Observers representing Johnny Tacherra (Republican) and Jim Costa (Democrat) in the 16th Congressional District race also were on hand. Tacherra has a 736-vote lead with all precincts reporting.

No one is surprised at the tight Catalano-Soria race. In their crowded June primary, Catalano finished just 30 votes in front of Soria.

Both candidates expressed nothing but confidence at their election-night parties, even as it became clear that neither would pull away to a comfortable lead. Catalano said his team made a heroic last-minute effort to ensure his vote-by-mail supporters didn't leave their ballots sitting on the coffee table. Soria said the same thing about her team and vote-by-mail supporters.

### Back to work

Fresno Mayor Ashley Swearingin on Wednesday was busy with City Hall issues like general plans and pedestrian malls.

The 2014 state controller's race was already shrinking in the rearview mirror. But she couldn't resist one more look at what-might-have-been, another round of woulda-coulda-shoulda. "I am very proud," Swearingin, a Republican, said of the statewide campaign she ran against victorious Democrat Betty Yee. "With a little bit more time and a little bit more money, we could have won."

Yee had 2.65 million votes compared to Swearingin's 2.37 million. With all precincts reporting, Yee captured 52.7% of the vote to Swearingin 47.3%. Late absentee and provisional ballots will be counted in the days ahead.

California's registered Democrats are a big army. The state's registered Republicans are a small army. This harsh reality, combined with the modest margin of Yee's victory, bodes well for Swearingin's future, said Tim Clark, her

campaign consultant.

"I think she did fantastic," Clark said. "She introduced herself in a major way in a major state."

If Republican strategists and money-dispensers had understood the mayor's statewide appeal, Clark said, Californians would have awakened on Wednesday to find Mayor Swearingin turned into Controller-elect Swearingin.

"Man, oh man, did they miss it," Clark said.

Swearingin on Wednesday thanked her City Hall team for keeping the municipal ship on steady course while she campaigned several days a week.

The next few months hold the 2035 general plan, an updated development code, more steps in returning vehicular traffic to what is now Fulton Mall and the perpetual quest of every Fresno mayor — jobs.

But there won't be any Sacramento conferences to craft policy for the richest state in the richest nation in the world. At least not yet.

Swearingin was asked if, in the wee hours of Wednesday morning, she had digested the events of the last seven or eight months and come to the conclusion that she and her view of her life's work had changed.

"My perspective has been changed permanently, and for the better," Swearingin said.

Go on.

"We (in Fresno) definitely deserve a seat at the table in Sacramento," she said.

There may be more to come on that question.

### **Return of Victor**

In Orange Cove, longtime Mayor Victor Lopez is back for round two after winning in unofficial returns from Tuesday's election.

Lopez kept a firm but controversial hold on the city since first becoming mayor in 1978. After nearly three decades, he lost his 2010 bid for re-election to Gabriel Jimenez, the city's former public works supervisor. Not long after, Lopez won a seat on the council as vice mayor in 2012 after beating the incumbent.

This time around, he challenged Jimenez and former City Council Member Glenda Hill for the job. Hill took 40.6% of the vote, while Jimenez came in last with 12.7%.

"I'm going to do this for your grandchildren and my grandchildren and our familias — our families," Lopez said Wednesday. "The community came through. They meant it when they kept telling me, 'We want you back.'" Lopez ran as part of a slate with Josie Cervantes and Minerva Pineda, who were vying to unseat City Council members Bertha Del Bosque and Ralph Pardo. Partial returns showed Pineda and Gilbert Garcia had received the most votes, while Cervantes trailed 14 votes behind.

But Lopez said Cervantes could still make a comeback.

"I really feel that the people supported the ticket," he said. "And we were a ticket. We went together, you know. There shouldn't be a deviation. I was really surprised to see Josie fall behind by 14 votes."

As for his top priorities, Lopez has big plans: a new wastewater system with new water meters throughout the city, a soccer field with lights and picnic tables, batting cages and a swimming pool.

"Working together nothing is impossible," he said.

### **Super close schools race**

Central Unified trustee Diana Milla took a razor-thin lead over businessman Rama Dawar in the Area 7 race with just 25 votes separating the candidates early Wednesday morning.

Results announced Tuesday night put Dawar just one vote ahead of Milla, but as final ballot results rolled in throughout the night, Milla took command. The race is still too close to call, with some mail-in and provisional ballots still left to count.

Neither candidate was immediately available for comment.

Reporters George Hostetter, Andrea Castillo and Hannah Furfaro contributed to this report.

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