

Judy Case McNairy, Phil Larson ending combined 28 years as Fresno County supervisors

By Marc Benjamin

Supervisors Judy Case McNairy and Phil Larson will walk out the door with 28 years of Fresno County government experience between them when they are replaced next week by their successors, Buddy Mendes and Brian Pacheco

Their departures, Case McNairy reminded those attending her final board meeting two weeks ago, do not go into effect until Jan. 5, when Mendes and Pacheco are sworn into office and become members of the Fresno County Board of Supervisors.

The most significant change on the board won't be political, since Mendes and Pacheco were endorsed by Case McNairy and Larson. But the average age of supervisors will drop — Mendes is four years younger than Case McNairy and Pacheco 35 years younger than Larson — from 62.4 to 49.6.

For their service on the board, Case McNairy and Larson, the most senior members, were lauded by longtime fellow supervisors.

“As people and as colleagues I have a tremendous amount of respect for them and the professional way they conducted themselves,” said Supervisor Henry R. Perea, who becomes the senior member of the board with his 10-year tenure. “When we were up there as a team, we had respect for each other and were always keeping Fresno County at the forefront.”

Supervisor Debbie Poochigian, who is expected to be named board chairwoman next week, said she will miss Case McNairy and Larson.

“They really are the best examples of public servants,” she said. “They have honesty, integrity and are hard-working, the type of people that everyone should want as their elected officials.”

Roads and libraries

Case McNairy, 62, a former Sanger City Council member, became a supervisor in 1999 by beating incumbent opponent Tom Perch.

Her district stretches 100 miles from east to west and includes nine of Fresno County's 15 cities, so road trips on her district's 1,400 miles of county roads were not uncommon. Roads became a centerpiece of her time in office.

“I don't know how many potholes we had fixed,” she said.

During her tenure, Academy Road was widened from two lanes to four, Highway 180 was widened through Fresno and past Sanger, improvements were made on Manning Avenue, and the widening of Mountain View Avenue will soon start.

Libraries also were a focus in her district. Facilities were renovated or replaced in Laton, Fowler, Caruthers and Orange Cove. The next library project in her district, she said, should target Reedley.

Strides, she said, also were made in improving the Fresno County retirement system — an area where other supervisors rely on her knowledge — by reducing the county's costs.

“We spent the last 12 years correcting our retirement system because it had been getting far too expensive and

precluding us from providing county services,” she said. “It’s being stabilized and benefits have been brought to a more normalized level.”

Retirement isn’t a word Case is using as she moves from the Fresno County Hall of Records. Her time will be spent running the Blossom Trail Bed & Breakfast that she and her husband of nearly 18 years, Fred McNairy, operate. She also is considering going back to a part-time nursing position at Saint Agnes Medical Center and continuing her pursuit of conquering high-elevation mountain trails in Central California. She and her husband spent their last summer vacation along the John Muir Trail.

She also expects to spend time at home “outside and digging in the dirt.”

Finishing second career

Larson, 81, of Kerman, spent 12 years in what he calls his “second career” covering an area that corresponded roughly with his territory working for agricultural products distributor Wilbur Ellis the previous 38 years. His district covers four cities and part of Fresno. He also farmed 40 acres.

Larson describes the West Fresno Regional Center, a one-stop that offers a multitude of services in economically disadvantaged west Fresno, among his chief achievements.

He points to library improvements in Mendota and Tranquillity, and cooperative library efforts, such as campaigns to get a new library in Firebaugh in tandem with West Hills College and a similar program with Central Unified School District to keep school libraries in Biola and at Teague Elementary in northwest Fresno open late and on Saturdays.

“Finances wouldn’t allow us to build new libraries, but it allowed us to work with the public schools,” he said. “We are doing things — they’re not flashy, but they’re serving people.”

A similar project Larson notes was getting the 93-acre community of Del Rio on the northeastern edge of Firebaugh, annexed into Firebaugh’s city limits to improved services for residents.

Both he and Case McNairy said their accomplishments include the new addition to the Fresno County Jail that will improve services for inmates.

But, Larson also points to unfinished projects. The design is moving ahead for the Highway 180 expansion west to Interstate 5, which Larson admits “probably won’t happen in my lifetime,” and a new fire station for Interstate 5 at Panoche Road. Money is available to build it, but not to staff the station, he said.

Larson said his health is improving after a 2013 scare last year during a supervisors meeting.

He intends to take three or four months off to spend more time with Joyce, his wife of 56 years, and to stay at his second home in Morro Bay.

As his final meeting two weeks ago wound down, Larson was upbeat and quick-witted about his impending retirement. As Poochigian brought up next year’s committee assignments, Larson brought smiles to the dais when he quipped, “I don’t want any.”

Contact Marc Benjamin: mbenjamin@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6166 or [@beebebenjamin](https://twitter.com/beebebenjamin) on Twitter.

Copyright

© 2014 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>