

Lisa Smittcamp takes over as Fresno County district attorney (video)

By John
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The crowd gathers and waits for the start of the swearing-in ceremony for Lisa Smittcamp, Fresno County's new district attorney Monday evening in downtown Fresno. THEFRESNOBEE

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For the first time in a dozen years, Fresno County has a new top prosecutor.

Lisa A. Smittcamp was sworn in Monday as Fresno County's district attorney, first in an official morning ceremony along with other county officials at the Hall of Records, and then in an afternoon ceremonial event attended by hundreds of friends and supporters at the Fresno County Plaza Ballroom.



The changing of the guard, however, was set in motion seven months ago, when Smittcamp soundly defeated incumbent Elizabeth Egan, who first won the post in 2002 and was unopposed in two subsequent re-election bids.



It was a contentious and often bitter campaign in which Smittcamp — a former prosecutor under Egan — raised issues about low office morale and high staff turnover. Smittcamp portrayed Egan as an out-of-touch executive who turned over much of the daily operations to Chief Assistant District Attorney Kelly Keenan, who was cast as a tyrannical manager who micromanaged prosecutors to the point that they were afraid to settle cases without his say.

Already, Keenan is gone, now working in Ventura County. A few Egan supporters have left the office as well. But Smittcamp had won the endorsements of the associations representing both prosecutors and investigators in Egan's office, so the transition is expected to go smoothly.

In fact, when Smittcamp went to the office Monday she was greeted by a balloon bouquet with the words "Welcome Home." Smittcamp — known first as Lisa Sondergaard as a prosecutor and then Lisa Sondergaard Smittcamp as a candidate — quit in August 2013 to challenge Egan.

She was officially sworn in by Fresno County Superior Court Judge Gary Hoff in front of a packed house of around 150 in the Fresno County supervisors' chamber, and in brief remarks said she was "probably the most unlikely person to ever enter into political life."

Later in the day, more than 500 people packed the Fresno County Plaza Ballroom for the second swearing in, this one administered by U.S. Magistrate Judge Sandra Snyder and filled with pomp and circumstance. Former U.S. District Court Judge Oliver W. Wanger was master of ceremonies, and the event featured prayers, the Pledge of Allegiance and an emotional speech from Smittcamp in which she thanked, among others, her mother, Ann, who she said taught her how to be strong.

The crowd was a Who's Who of Fresno's legal community, from judges to attorneys, and included a huge number of DA-office employees who Smittcamp will manage.

“I’m just excited to be back,” Smittcamp said in an interview.

Already, she said morale in the office has improved, a turn she was told came after she won the June primary against Egan.

Smittcamp said she also will return the office to the “efficient and effective” way it was run under District Attorney Ed Hunt, who preceded Egan. Gone is Keenan’s chief assistant district attorney position. Smittcamp will instead have a trio of assistant district attorneys to oversee the office — Jeff Dupras, Blake Gunderson and Steven Wright. Smittcamp swore in all three at the afternoon event.

Another challenge for Smittcamp was mending fences after the bruising election that forced people to take sides in business, political, legal and law enforcement communities.

Smittcamp said she has used much of the past seven months to reach out to Egan supporters, especially those in law enforcement.

One of those was Sheriff Margaret Mims.

“We’re going to be fine,” Mims said of her relationship with Smittcamp. “I didn’t know Lisa prior to the election. We didn’t have a relationship.”

The two met in Mims’ office, and the sheriff gave Smittcamp “information I wish somebody had given me when I was first elected” — a packet of tips and county management rules. Mims even organized the multi-agency honor guard for Smittcamp’s ceremonial swearing in.

“What’s important to remember for the public is we’re all professionals,” Mims said.

Fresno police Chief Jerry Dyer, a Smittcamp supporter, has also reached out to Egan backers, including Mims and Fresno Deputy Sheriff’s Association President Eric Schmidt.

“I’m looking forward to working with Lisa,” Dyer said. “There is a certain level of excitement within the DA’s Office once an election is over, perhaps more in this one because the rank-and-file (prosecutors and investigators) supported Lisa.”

Smittcamp used the past seven months to meet with law enforcement agencies, police chiefs, community organizations and employees in the District Attorney’s Office. She participated in meetings with Fresno County Superior Court officials on goals for this year.

Heading into office, Smittcamp said her primary goals are to improve morale among her employees and to increase their productivity, and to reach out to community organizations and schools in an effort to not only prosecute criminals but also to keep youths from falling into a life of crime. These efforts include truancy, drug and alcohol prevention and domestic violence awareness.

One effort started under Egan that Smittcamp will continue to push for is seeking out new office space for the District Attorney’s Office.

“We are bursting at the seams here at the DA’s Office,” Smittcamp said. “Sharing office space is not conducive to a good work environment. The work space is just so cramped.”

But it won’t be an easy job. Smittcamp takes office at the time when Dyer said there is a “weakened criminal justice system.”

Still, Wanger said she is the right person for the job.

“This is a new dawn,” he told the crowd at the afternoon event. “This is a great challenge. This is the time for a new

direction.”

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