

LOCAL ELECTIONS

Despite its tranquil reputation, Irvine has bitter political divisions

The well-to-do city isn't afflicted with the crime or racial tensions usually found in big cities, but the two City Council camps fight vehemently over development, land use and fiscal responsibility.

Tony Barboza
October 27, 2008

Irvine is perhaps best known for its master-planned villages, business prowess and designation as the nation's safest city of its size, four years running.

In other words, the type of community where you'd expect to find everything running smoothly.

But that prosperous tranquillity does not extend to City Hall, which has a reputation for bitter and divisive politics.

Next week's election is no exception, with 12 candidates -- including all five members of the City Council -- wrangling for control of the council and mayor's seat and debating two local ballot propositions.

Most have aligned themselves with one of the two mayoral candidates -- Councilman Sukhee Kang and Councilwoman Christina Shea, a former mayor.

If Kang wins, he would become the city's first Korean American mayor, and the first nonwhite mayor in a city that, despite being more than one-third Asian American, is stereotyped as a homogenous enclave. Kang is a close ally of Larry Agran, a longtime councilman and key advocate of the city's development of the Orange County Great Park.

If voters give the nod to Shea, they would be throwing their support to one of the park's most vocal critics and a longtime political foe of Agran.

The race has once again put Irvine's intense political divisions into sharp relief.

In this right-leaning community, three Democrats, led by Agran, who once sought the Democratic nomination for president, maintain a well-oiled political machine. The two-member Republican opposition, led by Shea, struggles to maintain a foothold, questioning the majority's greenlighting of big-ticket projects and its ties to developers and consultants.

One of two ballot propositions to be considered by voters, Measure R, is essentially a referendum on whether the current City Council majority has effectively managed the ambitious plan to build the 1,347-acre park on the former El Toro Marine base. The effort began more than six years ago but so far features only a balloon ride and a small "preview park."

The measure would preserve City Council-approved policies and funding mechanisms for the park for the next four years and keep the project under the control of the city.

Kang said the measure is needed to "codify all the progress we have made," pledging that the city will start construction on major features of the park by spring 2009.

But foes who have criticized the park's slow progress, including Shea, say the measure would create loopholes that would allow the city to dip into tax money to build the park, a charge supporters say is false.

The absence of big-city problems such as crime and poverty have meant that political polarization in Irvine has tended to revolve around issues of land use, development and fiscal responsibility. That became apparent in the 1990s, when two sides of Orange County began spending an estimated \$100 million to vehemently fight over whether to locate an international airport at the El Toro base.

Irvine's leaders prevailed and sprouted the idea for a massive park.

"It's a pretty affluent, well-educated community, so some of the normal cleavages over class and race just aren't there," said Phillip Gianos, a professor emeritus of political science at Cal State Fullerton. "Sometimes what's left are issues of style and tone."

Shea seized on that general sense of well-being in her campaign, writing in a letter mailed to voters that "because Irvine is America's safest city, the Agran Regime's failures often go unnoticed."

But that doesn't mean that the accusations aren't flying.

Three weeks after Councilman Steven Choi made a comment at a candidate forum linking opponent Todd Gallinger to a "dangerous Islamic organization" for his legal work on behalf the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Gallinger reported a death threat had been phoned in to his law office. Gallinger believed the comment led to the threat.

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"He implied that non-Christians should not have a place in government," Gallinger said. "In a place like Irvine that really isn't appropriate."

At recent council meetings, supporters of Choi and Gallinger have weighed in, either supporting Choi's right to stand up to an organization that he has concerns about, or denouncing his comments as hateful.

Irvine also has thrown around more money than cities of 183,000 typically do in municipal elections: Nearly \$900,000 has been spent on slick mailers, television ads and polls.

An 8-page, full-color mailer resembling a community newspaper and published by an associate of Agran has been sent weekly to many Irvine residents to promote his slate of candidates. Opponents have shot back in counter-mailers labeling the publication a "fake newspaper."

Asked if it was intended to fool voters, Agran said it was a dressed-up slate mailer, "a quality publication that is representative of the message we want to get out. . . . It has some elements of community news in it," adding it was useful to balance out Irvine's "poor and infrequent" news coverage.

Voters will also consider Measure S, which would give city leaders guidelines for withholding personal information, such as names, e-mail addresses and telephone numbers, in response to requests for public information. Foes call it a "secrecy ordinance" that the city could use to deny the press and the public access to important city documents.

A recent candidate forum showcased a widespread concern about the fractious tone of the city's politics.

Shea said the council "needs to get a divorce" and elect a new majority.

Kang said he would repair the loss of mutual respect, adding there are "no Republican roads or Democratic roads."

Margaret Wakeham, a former Irvine school board member who is running for council and is not aligned with either faction, said people keep asking her " 'What's going on at City Hall? . . . They don't like the dialogue, they don't like the nastiness, and we have to do something to change that."

But Agran said the council's frequent discord "is honest debate and discussion, it's democracy. It's not bickering. And it's what we're about at the local governmental level."

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