



Time for change in La Mesa: Allan and O'Dunn

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"Dick Rider doesn't know my city. He doesn't know what the people of **La Mesa** think. He is a special-interest group."

DAVE ALLAN

"Small cities in particular have big challenges. They become little bank accounts for the state to solve its financial problems."

SHANNON O'DUNN

The biggest issue in the La Mesa City Council races is actually Proposition L, the city's bid for a three-quarter-cent sales tax increase to erase a structural budget deficit.

This page has weighed in editorially against the sales tax increase. In our view, this is a time for city governments to be cutting costs, to rein in runaway pension programs, to require employees to contribute toward their own retirements.

That position puts us on a different page, both philosophically and pragmatically, than two of the three council candidates. No matter. Adults can agree to disagree, and there are other issues to be addressed as well.

The Village has bigger problems than parking meters that need to be addressed if it is to remain a vibrant shopping district. Leases in Grossmont Center expire in 2015 and how will the city prepare if a major shopping center is converted to other land uses? What to make of the flurry of grab-and-go bank robberies in a freeway-convenient city and how to prevent them?

Mayor Art Madrid, in office since 1981, is not on the ballot until 2010. But his drunk-on-the-sidewalk incident has not faded from memory and his companion's coming day in court will revive public doubts. Should a strong challenger step forward in two years, the council and staff must be prepared for possible election-season political paralysis.

Incumbent Dave Allan is seeking his third term. Allan, a former firefighter, has been a champion for public safety in the East County. Allan has been a vocal opponent to a highly unequal split of revenues between the county and the cities and he is not letting up now. He opposes the fire parcel tax on the ballot because of the non-inclusive process used to draft it and the way funds would be used. Allan lists as accomplishments for the past term the hiring of a gang detail and the placing of paramedics on fire trucks: "To me, it's a quality-of-life issue."

He supports the sales tax increase while adding that La Mesa needs to be aggressive in recruiting new businesses. Allan rails at legislators for raiding cities' revenue sources and leaving them in a bind.

Like three of his colleagues, Allan endorses challenger Shannon O'Dunn.

O'Dunn, a retired geologist and educator, is making a bid for the City Council two years after narrowly losing an election for a seat on the Grossmont-Cuyamaca Community College board. She has a record of service to the college district including oversight of its bond issue.

O'Dunn bills herself as a fresh set of eyes, someone whose four council endorsements say "We think we can work with her."

She believes the city needs to build a parking garage for downtown on land it owns on Lemon Avenue and charge for the service ("Free parking is not free"). She wants a business improvement district formed and zoning changes made to encourage mixed-use projects. Government's role, as she sees it, is to help a built-out city remodel. Study should be given to vacating some street segments near the American Legion Building.

O'Dunn supports the Proposition L sales tax increase because the city is almost out of reserves. However, she stresses it is not the long-term solution. "You cannot tax your way to prosperity."

Ruth Sterling has been the conscience of the La Mesa council for 16 years. Sometimes two agenda items behind, sometimes out of order, she usually has been a contrarian voice that frustrates her colleagues.

That has been the case on Proposition L with Sterling voting against putting the measure on the ballot. She accuses the city staff and other council members of not considering cost cutting, only tax increases.

She is of a generation that believes "You do without until you can pay for it." Along that line, she would defer capital projects such as a new fire engine or new windows for the community center.

A lack of endorsements from council members does not bother her: "The councilmen have their candidate, the people have theirs."

We have the utmost respect for Ruth Sterling, a retired nurse, a mother who raised a family by herself, someone who has put in 16 years of council service and who is not afraid to speak her mind. We should -- we endorsed her in previous races.

But Sterling has been on the council since 1992 and has had 16 years to implement her ideas or try to build alliances to govern. That has not happened.

We suggest it is time for a new face, a new approach.

We endorse Dave Allan and Shannon O'Dunn for La Mesa City Council.

Online: A list of the Union-Tribune endorsements for the Nov. 4 election can be found at uniontrib.com/more/endorse2008