Politics Report: Can Republicans Hold Their Safest SD Seat?

One D5 candidate can’t start raising money yet, another prospective one says the new salary hike made a run possible. Plus: The state might force Encinitas to finally solve its housing plan debacle.

Scott Lewis and Andrew Keatts
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As San Diego Republicans wander the wilderness, one of the most frequently cited data points about their predicament is that even their safest seat on the San Diego City Council isn’t all that safe anymore.
That seat is District 5, currently occupied by Councilman Mark Kersey. It has not been competitive in recent history. The GOP could rally around someone, and that would be it. Kersey ran unopposed for his first term — there was no even nominal opposition. Before him, Carl DeMaio controlled the seat without much trouble. And before him, Brian Maienschein, the Republican version, had no trouble holding it.

But now a fascinating rivalry is brewing on the right. And it’s not impossible to imagine a Democrat competing for the seat.

Here’s the registration breakdown for the district.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Percent of Registered Voters</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democrats</td>
<td>30.5 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republicans</td>
<td>32.5 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Party Preference</td>
<td>32.4 percent</td>
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The most active candidate so far is Republican Joe Leventhal. He’s the only one to announce he is in — all in, totally in, “hey-have-I-told-you-I’m-running” in. He’s actively seeking endorsements. He’s lining up the necessary contractors to pull it off.

There’s just one problem (and it’s not small): He’s not allowed to spend or raise any money for the campaign until September. That’s because he was a member of the city’s
Ethics Commission until September 2018, when he resigned and announced his intention to run for office.

So he can talk to people all he wants. He can line up fundraising events … but he can’t have one. He can’t even hire a professional photographer. Well he could, he just couldn’t use the photos for the campaign.

**Leventhal: City Leadership Is Not Good**

“There’s a lack of leadership in the region. Some problems are not getting better — homelessness, affordable housing and potholes in our roads,” Leventhal said.

**On roads:** Leventhal said the city is misleading people on the state of roads. He said the city uses the OCI (overall conditions index) to assess the quality of our roads, which takes into account more factors than just the state of the pavement. Los Angeles and other cities use PCI (pavement conditions index), which Leventhal called “a more honest assessment of condition of pavement. They’re telling people roads are in a good condition based on what I would call a creative metric.”

**The mayor’s office responded:** “The city’s OCI is 71.8 and its PCI is 71.2 (the assessment rounds these figures to 72 and 71, respectively). Both are in the ‘good’ range between 70 and 100. So regardless of which metric you use the rating is similar and both result in ‘good’ condition,”
wrote Craig Gustafson, the mayor’s spokesman, in an email to us.

Gustafson also sent along a link to a 2016 assessment of the city’s streets.

In short, the roads are “good.”

**T.J. Zane: Thinking About it**

This week, T.J. Zane, a prominent member of the Republican establishment, Poway school board member and former leader of the Lincoln Club, filed the first of several forms you have to put in to run for City Council in District 5.

But Zane told us he’s not in yet. He’s talking to people and hasn’t started raising money.

“I just want to see how I can contribute positively to debates in the city right now,” he said. We asked if there were any issues that animated him in particular, and he said there weren’t any yet.

**The New Salary Helped**

Zane has been pretty open that last year’s Measure L, which will increase the salaries for members of the City Council, made the campaign something he could envision.
“Anyone could admit that it is difficult to raise a family on $75,000 a year,” said Zane, who has three children. “Had it remained the same, I wouldn’t really be giving it much consideration.”

He has experience: We asked Zane what he has learned from his time on the Poway school board. He was, after all, deeply involved in local politics for many years before running himself.

“People think that when they run for school board, a lot of their time is going to be spent having direct impact on what is happening in the classroom. But when you get in there, you find you spend the bulk of your time on negotiations with bargaining units, complaints, lawsuits, student disciplinary issues and other complex issues.”

Two Democrats have also filed: Marni von Wilpert, a deputy city attorney who just started with the city last year, and Hugh Rothman, an active member of the party’s Central Committee. We’ll connect with them soon.

The Push for an Environmental Justice Focus on a 2020 MTS Measure
The Metropolitan Transit Agency’s push to put a tax increase to improve transit is becoming a top priority for local Democrats ahead of the 2020 election.

And the environmental justice community is making moves within the Democratic coalition to put its stamp on the measure.

Last month, a group calling itself the San Diego Transportation Equity Working Group submitted its list of policy requests for any transit measure to MTS. The group includes the Environmental Health Coalition, Mid-City Can, San Diego 350, the City Heights CDC and the Center on Policy Initiatives.

“One of our main goals is that there should be a transparent and meaningful process that centers environmental justice concerns,” said Ana Castro Reynoso, policy advocate for EHC.
In some ways the working group’s requests are typical. They submitted, for instance, a list of transit projects they’d like to see in a measure. That list includes the Purple Line, a trolley line from the South Bay to Kearny Mesa, an express train on the Blue Line from San Ysidro to downtown, frequency enhancements on the Blue Line and Orange Line, a new Rapid bus line from SDSU to the South Bay, transit-only lanes on the I-94 freeway connecting to downtown and a new transit station on 25th Street in Golden Hill.

But the group also is requesting policy changes that aren’t projects, like a requirement defining “environmental justice communities” as those that rank in the top 30 percent of the CalEnviroScreen, a state tool for evaluating census tracts that are most burdened and vulnerable to pollution, and then focusing transit investments in those areas.

“For us, that’s really important because it gives us a more specific sense of where to put the money, where the resources should go, and we know based on a lot of research that it would be going to a place that’s underserved in a lot of ways,” Castro Reynoso said. “Investing in environmental justice is investing in the whole. It has the biggest bang for its buck, and it’s where there is the greatest need.”

The State Is Coming for Encinitas
Encinitas may be on the verge of untangling its nastiest political knot, with the help of state regulators.

The Department of Housing and Community Development this week sent the city a letter demanding that it “amend or invalidate” Proposition A, the measure approved by voters in 2013 that mandated all upzonings go to a citywide vote.

That’s meant the city has been unable to adopt a housing element, a state-required plan that shows where and how a city will accommodate future housing production at all income levels, because every time the city has crafted a measure it’s needed to put it in front of voters, who have rejected it in back-to-back elections.

This was already coming to a head after the city lost a court battle against the Building Industry Association, when a judge said Prop. A needed to be put aside so the city could adopt a housing element.

After that ruling, at the end of last year, Encinitas submitted the housing element it hoped to adopt. The state came back this week demanding revisions to the measure and the city’s development standards before it would give its seal of approval along with its demand to change or undo Prop. A.

“The bottom line is, our back is against the wall. We have no ability to maneuver, negotiate,” said Encinitas Mayor Catherine Blakespear. “The court said you have to get the state’s approval. And the state said you have to do this.”
Legally, what is it we can do and need to do? That’s the basic question.”

The state specified that some of the locations identified for low-income housing are unsuitable, that the city needs to change how it measures the height of buildings to be more permissive under development rules and to lift the height limit imposed by Prop. A from 30 feet to up to 39 feet, and that review standards that are at all subjective be replaced with objectives ones instead.

Blakespear said it’s unclear if the people who have regularly voted against the city’s proposed housing elements recognize that the city is being told in no uncertain terms that it must adopt a plan that allows for more housing.

“There are times where it seems there’s a recognition that the culture and state law are changing aggressively and predictably, from the language and rhetoric, to actual changes to state laws related to housing, and with the governor suing the city of Huntington Beach,” Blakespear said. “I mean, there’s no question which direction things are going. But I think there’s still a real commitment to their worldview, which is that adding density decreases quality of life for them. That the state housing crisis cannot be solved by Encinitas and that we shouldn’t be forced to do this. But I’m an elected official, and I need to follow state law, and we all have to do our part to provide more housing – at all levels. And so, we have to get this together. We have to do our job.”