

Riverside City Council candidates question motivation behind incumbent's actions

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Several Riverside City Council candidates are raising questions about a city-sponsored event and newsletter that they say highlighted incumbent Steve Adams at taxpayer expense in the weeks leading up to the election.

The Ward 7 Outlook newsletter was mailed out for the first time last month to residents and listed projects planned for the ward, which Adams represents.

City officials, including Adams, also held the first-ever Community Partnership Summit last week at La Sierra Park's gymnasium, which provided residents with information on city services and invited them to become more involved.

"This is essentially used to promote Steve Adams," said Roy Saldanha, a Ward 7 candidate. "They could have started it in a non-election year."

Saldanha said he has filed complaints about the newsletter with the Riverside County district attorney's office and the state Fair Political Practices Commission.

Adams said there was no impropriety with either the newsletter or the summit. The Police Department organized the summit, and the newsletter was to inform residents of city projects, he said.

"We're not going to stop running the city to help someone get elected," Adams said after the summit. "We work every day. This election could wind up in a runoff, and these people still need services."

Five candidates, including Adams, are running for the Ward 7 seat on the council, representing parts of La Sierra and Arlanza. Mail-in ballots for the election will go out May 7 and will be tallied June 5.

Adams' challengers said the Ward 7 Outlook contained differences from the standard Riverside Monthly newsletter that is mailed out to all residents.

Former mayor and current candidate Terry Frizzel said that on the newsletter, Adams' name is listed above the other six council members and even the mayor. In addition, the flier was addressed to specific people or addresses, instead of generic postal customers, as the Riverside Monthly is, she said.

"It was like a campaign piece more or less," Frizzel said by phone.

Outreach Effort

City Manager Brad Hudson said city staff members are creating special newsletters that will go out to certain wards or neighborhoods once or twice a year.

"We have an ongoing, aggressive effort to inform residents of what's going on in the city," Hudson said, responding to other candidates' complaints at the March 27 council meeting.

City Attorney Greg Priamos said staff members complied with the law. Nothing prevents the city from trying to provide information to area residents, he said by phone.

But some residents weren't satisfied by the explanations.

La Sierra resident Tom Martin said the newsletter offended him, because he took it

to be an endorsement of Adams.

"If the city admitted they published this, they ought to be horsewhipped," Martin said by phone.

At least one councilman said the city should limit when it sends out the newsletters.

"It's inappropriate to be sending stuff like that out before an election," Ward 5 Councilman Ed Adkison said by phone.

More than 200 people attended last week's neighborhood summit -- so many that organizers ran out of hot dogs for the residents, city Housing and Neighborhoods Manager Eva Yakutis said.

The McAuliffe Elementary School choir performed at the event. Several city departments set up informational tables and exhibits on easels around the gymnasium. The Public Works Department even had an LCD television showing how its new traffic management center would work.

PowerPoint presentations about projects, including La Sierra-area park improvements, made up the bulk of the event. Adams gave brief remarks before and after the presentations.

La Sierra residents Philip and Rose Aldrich said the projects would benefit the community. Rose Aldrich said the information would affect how she would vote in the election, although she didn't know much about the candidates.

"If (Parks Director) Mr. (Ralph) Nunez were running, I'd vote for him," she said after the meeting.

Newsletter, Summit Cost

The summit cost the city more than \$2,100, while the Ward 7 Outlook cost \$3,840 to produce and mail, city spokesman Austin Carter said by e-mail. The Riverside Monthly costs an average of \$25,800 to publish and mail, he said.

Candidate Daniel Gressmann attended the summit as a Riverside Neighborhood Partnership volunteer. But he questioned the timing of the event.

"It looks like Steve trying to create a buzz right before the election," Gressmann said.

Art Garcia, another candidate, said the event didn't have a question-and-answer session.

"Where's the public voice in this type of forum?" Garcia said.

'Extreme Display'

Douglas Johnson, a redistricting and elections expert at the Rose Institute for State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, said the summit sounded like a presidential race with an incumbent flying in to dispense gifts.

"Every incumbent tries to play up what they've done for their district," he said by phone. "But to bring in a ton of city staff is unusual and questionable. It's an extreme display of the power of the incumbent."

Johnson added that such tactics were "somewhat of a sign of desperation to take such a risk now."

The city has two more events scheduled in the La Sierra area over the next few weeks: a Mayor's Night Out meeting at Twin Hill Elementary on April 25 and a

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celebration of trail improvements at La Sierra Park on April 28.

Saldanha predicted the Ward 7 outreach effort would end after the election. But Adams said the events would continue so residents would know what's going on in their neighborhoods and have a voice.

"As a community, we'll make La Sierra the greatest place in Riverside," he told residents.