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Hercules Voters Recall Mayor, Council Member



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HERCULES, Calif. -- Voters in Hercules overwhelmingly approved the recall of their mayor and a City Council member in a special election Tuesday, according to unofficial election results.

While the elections department is still working to count absentee and mail-in ballots that were turned in at the polls on Tuesday, preliminary results show that 87 percent of voters opted to oust Mayor Joanne Ward and 80 percent voted to recall her fellow council member Donald Kuehne.

Dan Romero, an independent insurance agent and one of the leaders of the recall effort, was elected to fill the seat vacated by former mayor Ed Balico, who resigned in January moments before Romero served him, Ward and Kuehne with recall papers. Romero beat out his two competitors with more than 46 percent of the vote.

William Wilkins, a retired public sector real estate manager, was elected to replace Ward with more than 52 percent of the vote.

Gerard Boulanger, who was the only candidate running for Kuehne's seat, received more than 92 percent of the vote, despite media reports that he admitted days before the election that his resume listed false university degrees and that he lied about serving on a city council in his native France.

Boulanger declined to comment Wednesday on the election and would not say whether he planned accept the City Council seat.

"He's going to have to answer to the city and to the citizens," Romero said.

Romero said he doesn't believe there was legally anything the city can do to prevent Boulanger from taking the seat because he was still a private citizen when he allegedly misrepresented himself during his campaign.

Romero and Wilkins both said they have their work cut out for them when they are sworn in later in June.

Some of the most pressing issues include passing new general fund and redevelopment agency budgets

and finding a new city manager and city attorney, both of whom have announced that they will be resigning June 30.

Wilkins, who currently serves on the city's financial advisory committee, said the city's general fund budget has a \$3 million shortfall after \$3 million in cuts that have already been made.

"I think we're down to the bone with layoffs," Wilkins said.

Wilkins and Romero were in agreement that the city needs to concentrate on generating new sources of revenue instead of raising taxes or making more cuts.

Wilkins said the city is in negotiations to build a new Costco and a new Safeway within city limits.

The city's redevelopment agency is also operating in the red, with a \$1.5 million deficit, Wilkins said.

He said he believes the financial advisory committee has come up with a solution to the problem, but said he couldn't speak publicly about it yet.

As for finding a new city manager, Romero said he wants to re-hire former city manager Charlie Long as soon as possible.

Over the past six months, proponents of the recall have said that the former City Council's decision to fire Long in December for allegedly "revealing the truth about city financial woes" prompted their recall effort.

A Contra Costa County civil grand jury report last year accused the former City Council of nepotism, questionable decision-making and a lack of government transparency.

According to the grand jury report, the city's redevelopment agency selected NEO/Affordable Housing Group in 2003 to provide services to the city. Nelson Oliva was the owner of that company.

In 2007, the City Council hired Oliva to be the city manager.

According to the grand jury report, shortly before he became city manager, Oliva transferred ownership of NEO to his daughters.

In addition to administering affordable housing programs for the city, NEO administered the city's business loan program, neighborhood cleanup program, secure mailbox program, weatherization program for seniors and gas valve shut-off program, according to the grand jury report.

The report said that the city paid more than \$2 million to NEO for its service agreements without using a competitive bid process or amending its contract with the company for the expanded services.

According to Romero, City Council members approved the agreements as part of the council's consent calendar with no public discussion.

The grand jury also found that redevelopment loans were made to immediate family members of former City Council members and that the city mishandled sales of homes purchased by the city's affordable housing program.

When Long was hired to replace Oliva, he immediately published reports letting citizens know that the city was in a financial crisis, an action that quickly got him fired, according to recall proponents.

"I want Charlie Long back," Romero said. "I want him back today."

"Why go out and recruit someone when we have a person who has already shown his work ethic, his duty to

the city and his integrity?" Romero said.

He said he believes the recall shows that the community wants Long back as well and that citizens are willing to fight for him.

"I think Charlie would be an excellent interim city manager," Wilkins said.

He said Long owns a company and may not want to be the city's permanent, full-time city manager.

During the recall campaign, Kuehne created a website claiming he was being blamed for things that happened before he was elected to the City Council in 2008.

Ward said Wednesday that she ran as hard as she could to keep her seat, but that she respects the voters' decision.

"During the whole time I served on the City Council I tried to do things the proper way," Ward said.

She said that when citizens accused the council of a lack of transparency, she made an effort to publicly discuss decisions made during closed session meetings.

She also said that when the city hired Oliva to be the city manager, it was her understanding that he was no longer involved in NEO.

When the scandal broke that Oliva's daughters were involved in running NEO, the City Council severed its contract with the company, Ward said.