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## Parties take diverse paths in 53rd Assembly District race

Four Republicans are seeking the seat, splitting support and funds, while Democratic leaders have rallied behind one candidate.

By Nick Green

Daily Breeze

When former Redondo Beach Mayor Greg Hill filed papers to run for the 53rd Assembly District seat, he sought to avoid a divisive -- and expensive -- open primary battle by requesting the withdrawal of other GOP candidates.

He was roundly ignored -- and now faces three other Republicans in the primary that will see the top Republican vote-getter advance to a probable runoff in November.

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In contrast, Democrats worked behind the scenes to clear the field in seeking a successor for the late Mike Gordon, persuading the likes of Manhattan Beach Councilman Jim Aldinger to step aside.

Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez interviewed potential candidates and, after making his selection, came to the South Bay to announce the candidacy of the anointed one -- Torrance Councilman Ted Lieu.

Two different political parties.

Two distinct approaches.

At stake: one of the few competitive seats in California politics -- voter registration is 40.8 percent Democratic, 34.3 percent Republican -- that both parties sense could go either way.

"It shows you how much more disciplined the Democrats are than the Republicans," said Allan Hoffenblum, a Los Angeles-based GOP political consultant. "What you had was highly powered incumbent Democratic legislators and a Democratic speaker able to use clout to clear the field. There's no one comparable on the Republican side."

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A sprinkling of Democratic voters has publicly objected to the strategy of the party's Sacramento leadership. They contend the high-handed move is insulting and somewhat dictatorial to local voters.

"When (voters) see a muscle job, I don't think that impresses people," said Shawn Steel of Rolling Hills, the former chairman of the state Republican Party. "It looks like machine politics."

"I think Republicans need to have a primary," he added. "Without a primary, politicians get lazy."

Not surprisingly, Lieu takes exception to the characterization, although interestingly his campaign manager is Becki Ames, a one-time aide to former Torrance-area Assemblyman George Nakano, who most recently worked for Nunez.

"This is not being dictated by Sacramento," Lieu said. "I had a lot of local support before the speaker came in."

But Joe Cerrell, a Democratic political consultant, said that in reality that's the way things are done in both parties as the political stakes get higher -- and pricier.

"The Democrats learned from the Republicans -- they were (once) the disciplined party," he said.

"The truth of the matter is that's what leadership is all about. There's a tremendous financial savings. ... Think of how much money you've got to spend when you're fighting each other."

The question, Hoffenblum points out, then becomes, will the Democrats invest huge sums of money in the race to try to win over 50 percent of the voters plus one next month and avoid the runoff entirely?

Most experts believe that's unlikely simply because five major candidates will split the vote.

Still, it underlines the growing importance of money in ever-more expensive political campaigns, especially cash from political action committees that's spent on behalf of candidates.

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Aldinger said it was the inability to raise money once the Democratic leadership threw its weight behind Lieu that played a major role in his decision to withdraw from the race.

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That, and the Republicans' inability to narrow their field.

"It definitely played into my decision," he said. "Greg (Hill) unfortunately last November upset a lot of people with his campaign style and that's going to haunt him in this race."

Of course, that assumes Hill emerges as the victorious Republican.

His opponents include five-year Torrance Councilman Paul Nowatka and Dr. Mary Jo Ford, a Manhattan Beach anesthesiologist.

Ford is a political unknown, but has said she is prepared to spend as much as \$500,000 of her own money to win. Moreover, she is a female candidate in a party that has trouble attracting women voters and claims to have the backing of Kevin McCarthy, the Republican Assembly leader.

McCarthy's press secretary did not return a call seeking comment.

The other Republican, Venice resident Paul Whitehead, was the party's sacrificial lamb when he went up against Rep. Jane Harman, D-El Segundo, last time around and isn't expected to be a factor.

While Hill would likely win on name recognition alone if the election were held today, Hoffenblum said, he also comes with hefty political baggage.

That includes reality television show appearances that reinforced his image as an intellectual lightweight, a vitriolic campaign against Gordon peppered with half-truths and a dubious record of accomplishment during his mayoral tenure.

"He probably has no support from legislators," said Paul Heygi, Ford's campaign manager. "They don't think he can win -- they know he can't win. ... He did worse (last year) than the voter registration margin right now. The margin is six points and he lost by eight."

Ford sees an opportunity, especially in a Democratic-leaning district that favors moderates.

"I have the ability to not only get the Republican vote, but the crossover vote," she said. "I've got a clean record; I'm a fresh face."

Nowatka did not return calls seeking comment.

But Mike Richman, Hill's campaign manager, said their polling shows Hill holds a 10-point lead over Lieu, supporting their contention that other Republicans should have stepped aside.

"The other candidates were more interested in their future political careers than what's best for the party," he said.

The differing philosophies -- or respective bows to political realities depending on your point of view -- mean voters, whether they know it or not, will be passing judgment on more than just a candidate at the ballot box.

"It's going to be a real test between the parties," Steel said. "The Democrats are showing they're brutally more efficient. The Republicans are basically cowboys."

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