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Accusations of conflicts mark District 9 race

By Josh Baugh - Express-News

In a three-way race for District 9 on the City Council, two financially lagging candidates have taken collective aim at Elisa Chan, who they say has too many conflicts of interest to hold the North Side seat.

Chan bats down the accusations from Weston Martinez and William Davidson, saying her company has sought no city contracts since she decided to run for the council last May. As for existing contracts, Uni-tech Consulting Engineers Inc., Chan's company, will finish the work but will walk away from any project that changes. Chan said her company couldn't bid on city business while she serves on the council, anyway.

She said her engineering experience would benefit the city because of the technical expertise she's acquired about public works projects.

Chan, 42, defends herself against the conflict of interest accusations on the campaign trail and focuses on her priorities — transportation, infrastructure, enhanced public safety and economic growth.

Those are largely the same issues on which Martinez, a 33-year-old midlevel manager at AT&T, campaigns, although he talks more about the tax burden.

“Tax relief, public safety, infrastructure improvement — that all cascades into economic development,” he said.

Davidson, a 47-year-old attorney in private practice and a former substitute teacher, campaigns on his opposition to toll roads, his support of green initiatives and his hope to improve the education system.

Better education leads to lower unemployment and less crime, he said. Davidson acknowledges that the council has no control over what goes on in schools, but he believes it can lend its voice to making improvements.

“I think it can change through citizens getting involved and through the council being more publicly involved,” he said.

Both Davidson and Martinez have run for office before. In 2001, Davidson ran unsuccessfully in District 10 against David Carpenter. In 2005, Martinez opposed Kevin Wolff for the District 9 seat and lost.

Chan has a sizable fundraising lead. In the three-month period ending in March, she raised and spent almost \$38,000, but she still has more than \$52,000 on hand. Davidson reports not having raised any funds, though he spent \$200. Martinez raised \$1,875, spent almost \$3,600 and reported having \$283 left.

Both candidates who trail in fundraising have suggested that Chan's campaign finances tie her to big-name developers. But Chan has said she's proud of her support and gave her own campaign \$50,000 — in part to remain independent.

“When people invest in you by supporting you financially, that's a good thing,” she said. “I won't be swayed by (special) interest groups.”

In interviews, Martinez mentioned Chan's English-speaking ability, and Davidson called her by her full name — Wan-Yu Elisa Chan.

Chan, who was born in Taiwan, said she “would be lying if I told you there were not racial undertones,” but she dismisses the issue quickly.

“I have never viewed myself as a victim,” she said.

In much the same way, she brushes off the allegations she's heard repeatedly regarding conflicts of interest. Her opponents say Chan would have to recuse herself from too many votes to be an effective councilwoman. Davidson and Martinez say they're each a better fit because they have no city contracts.

With her husband, Chan owns Unitech Consulting Engineers, which holds two city engineering-design contracts worth about \$930,000. Unitech is also a subcontractor on 18 other city projects, its share worth almost \$1.4 million. All the projects are part of the city's 2007 bond program.

But Chan said there's no conflict of interest because the contracts have nothing to do with policy. Unitech's two prime consultant projects are designing replacements for a group of three bridges and a design project for the Catalpa-Pershing Bridge, the latter of which will likely change in scope, “which means that our firm will walk away from that contract,” she said.

“I'd like to point out that I'm simply finishing up my commitment to the city on those designs,” Chan said of the three-bridge project. “And the scope of work for the contract we have has nothing to do with policy. It's just designing some bridges.”

Martinez said Chan would have to recuse herself from votes that could affect her company in the future.

On his campaign Web site, Martinez says part of his job at AT&T is working with “senior-level corporate executives and government officials” with agencies such as the city and the Texas Department of Transportation. Martinez has said his work doesn't pose a problem because he doesn't negotiate contracts and that he would recuse himself from votes that might affect AT&T.

Davidson said: “Well, I don't have any contracts with the city. ... So I can tell you I don't have any conflicts at all.”

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