

THE SUN-GAZETTE

New council members shake up local daises

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By: Staff

City councils around the county reorganize to elect new mayors in light of newly seated council members being sworn into office

TULARE COUNTY – Some city councils around the county met over the first two weeks of December to swear in their new and returning council members.

Visalia and Lindsay saw the departure of two multi-decade stalwarts, both served as mayors. Tulare is on the cusp of jettisoning the rival politics that have plagued them for several years as two moderate newcomers, Steve Harrell and Patrick Isherwood, take their seats.

Farmersville made some changes of their own as longtime city councilman Paul Boyer was selected to replace Greg Gomez as mayor.

Meanwhile the hamlet of Exeter saw little change to their council as two seats remained the same. The biggest difference is their new addition to the dais as they swore in Justin Mills, who now represents District E.

EXETER

Exeter City Council met on Dec. 8 to swear in their newest council member and select a new mayor and vice mayor.

The council appointed Justin Mills to the council in August after former councilman Jeremy Petty left the seat vacant just months before the end of his first term. Petty said he was moving to Clovis and looking for a new position in the Fresno area. Mills was also the only eligible candidate after the Tulare County Elections Office deadline passed in early August.

In Mills' remarks and letter to the council in August, Mills noted that he has been an Exeterite since his family moved here in seventh grade. He graduated from Exeter High School and "bleeds blue and gold." He served his country in the Army and now works as a software engineer for the County of Tulare. He said to the council and expressed in his candidacy letter that his experience in the service has given him the ability to make difficult calls.

"[A] skill I gained while serving is the ability to make tough decisions during stressful situations," Mills states in his letter of interest that he submitted to the city council. "I also learned the dangers of analysis paralysis, where the fear of making a bad decision keeps one from making a decision at all."

Councilman Frankie Alves who served in the U.S. Navy said that there are tough calls to make for the city at the moment. In particular when it comes to the budget and sales tax measure. He said that increased sales tax revenue will be a turning point to help alter the way the city has operated and offer more projects that have been deferred.

Mayor Mary Waterman-Philpot echoed Alves point and said the city has deferred projects for too long.

“Too many things got kicked down the road ... And growing hurts, and fixing everything hurts. There’s a lot of pain with it financially and the inconvenience but Exeter is on a really good track and I appreciate you stepping forward and wanting to help us see part of the solution and part of making Exeter even better,” Waterman-Philpot said.

Fortunately for Exeter their proposed 1% sales tax measure passed by an overwhelming margin – 69.78%.

Mills said in his comments to the council that he would not be a councilmember governed by his ego and is more than willing to reach the right solution even if it’s someone else’s idea.

“I think it’s important to listen to all ideas and try to come up with one that is the best. I never walk into a room assuming I have the best answer...nine times out of 10 it’s usually a combination of everyone’s ideas where you can come up with the best course of action,” Mills said.

David Hails and Barbara Sally were also appointed in lieu in August as the only eligible candidate in Districts A and B respectively.

During their Dec. 8 meeting the council decided to shake up the dais. Sally moved just one proverbial seat over—council meetings are held over Zoom now—after she was unanimously voted to move from vice mayor to mayor. Her old title was also unanimously given to councilman Frankie Alves.

As mayor, Mary Waterman-Philpot said she enjoyed her time at the center of the dais and believes Exeter has a good council.

“We’ve just made a lot of progress over the last two years and I think we work really well as a team,” Waterman-Philpot said.

Sally said she was happy to hold the confidence of her fellow councilmembers.

“Thank you very much for your vote of confidence. We do have a lot of work going forward and completing and starting new items,” Sally said.

TULARE

After a contentious and close election over District 3, which came down to just seven votes, Tulare City Council convened their first meeting as a new council last Tuesday, Dec. 8.

Longtime outgoing councilman Carlton Jones, who lost to Steve Harrell by those seven votes, left the council with some parting words. Encouraging members to overcome the political divisiveness that has plagued the group for so long, without acknowledging the role he played in creating it.

“I remember what it felt like when I first got elected and how excited I was to have an opportunity to serve my community,” Jones said. “[My] hope for this new council is that you can lead the city out of the political rhetoric and just back to being a healthy grounded city that cares for each other. That pushes for each other and can respectfully and kindly disagree.”

Patrick Isherwood, who unseated councilman Greg Nunley while sidelining three other hopefuls, thanked Nunley for his service on the council.

“I’m honored to be selected to represent the city on the city council, and I do want to thank Councilman Nunley for his service and appreciate not only his commitment, dedication and tenacity to Tulare for the last four years,” Isherwood said. “And it’s really about Tulare. And I’m very just humbled and just honored to be here.”

Jose Sigala defeated his opponent, Clara Bernardo, handily in the Nov. 3 election, but after Tuesday night he yielded his mayoral gavel to Dennis Mederos. Terry Sayer nominated Mederos for the role at the center of the dais, and he was approved unanimously. Sayer was then nominated by Mederos to fill the role of vice mayor, and she was also approved unanimously.

Both Mederos and Sayer effused their mutual respect for one another. They said they have had a fruitful working relationship in the two years they have been on the council together.

“One thing that we discovered as we’ve grown closer is how much we, as many others who are here tonight, realize that we love this city, and we want the city to continue to grow and to head in the right direction,” Mederos said.

“I appreciate this opportunity more than I can express to serve in this position alongside mayor Mederos,” Sayer said. “We’ve had a really lovely working relationship these two years I’ve learned much from him. And I appreciate the opportunity to grow more and to learn more.”

With intensive care unit (ICU) capacity at 0% for the San Joaquin Valley region Mederos said in his remarks that COVID-19 vaccine procurement is an immediate priority as mayor.

“It’s my hope that we’ll start working towards situating our citizens in a position to where they can readily take a vaccine that it’s on its way,” Mederos said.

VISALIA

Filling Bob Link’s shoes as mayor will be difficult, but at least Steve Nelsen has stepped into the role before. At its Dec. 8 meeting, Nelsen was unanimously approved as the new mayor by the Visalia City Council to replace the retiring Link. Nelsen, the District 5 representative on the council, will serve as the city’s mayor through November 2021. Nelsen served two prior terms as mayor in 2014-15 and 2016-17.

Since joining the council in 2010, Nelsen has worked directly on projects such as the ImagineU Children’s Museum lease agreement, the Visalia Animal Care Center, the Waste Water Treatment Plant, Visalia’s Fire Station 53 and the Visalia Emergency Communications Center.

A San Diego native, Nelsen holds a bachelor’s degree in communications from California State University Fullerton. He is currently chairman for the Tulare County Council of Cities and of the Mid-Kaweah Groundwater Sustainability Agency. He was also a founding member of the Visalia Advisory Flood Map Committee.

In addition to his role on the City Council, Mayor Nelsen is the Executive Director for Downtown Visalians and leads his team as they proactively mold the future of downtown with property and business owners, and coordinate programs ranging from economic development to public area enhancements.

In January 2015, Mayor Nelsen established the C.A.R.E. Foundation and serves as the CEO and President of the Foundation, which helps dementia and Alzheimer's patients and their loved ones understand the journey they are about to embark on. The C.A.R.E. Foundation provides information on in-home health care, facilities, hospice care and more. Ever committed to his community, Mayor Nelsen also serves as the President of the Tulare County Sheriff's Office Foundation Board.

Mayor Nelsen served as the Golden West High School Soccer Coach from 1990 to 1999 and is a member of Neighborhood Church. He is the proud father of three children and is the grandfather to 17 grandchildren.

Replacing Bob Link as the District 2 representative on the council is Brett Taylor. The Visalia native and longtime planning commissioner introduced his family and said a few words.

"I know a lot of people in this room. I've been involved with the city for many years ... I've already met with all the department heads, so I really feel that I can really start immediately and hit the ground running," Taylor said.

Taylor was sworn in during the work session prior to the regular council meeting along with returning councilmember Phil Cox, who represents District 1. The three-term councilmember was unanimously selected to serve as vice mayor through next November.

LINDSAY

At the Dec. 8 Lindsay city council meeting, Ramona Caudillo, Hipolito Cerros and Ramiro Serna were appointed to the office of Lindsay City Councilmember in lieu of election, solidifying Lindsay's historic all-Hispanic council.

The three will be sworn in at or before the first regularly scheduled council meeting in January 2021, upon which the next mayor of Lindsay will be appointed.

Mayor Pam Kimball, Vice Mayor Laura Cortes and Councilman Brian Watson will be taking their exit from Lindsay public office. Cortes decided to take the opportunity to express her gratitude for service on the council with some words at the end of the Dec. 8 meeting, first thanking her family, who were in attendance.

"Thank you to my husband and my kids who have helped make this experience possible, they were definitely the champs," Cortes said. "I missed a bunch of practices and a lot of other valuable time. But they made sure that I took on this role seriously, so I want to say thank you to them for always being my support system.

Cortes said she didn't let the difficult times stifle her commitment to her role as vice mayor of Lindsay.

"At times it was hard, but honestly I can say I really did take this roll seriously," Cortes said. "You can count the times I was absent maybe once or twice a year, if at that, but I even planned our vacations around that, I made sure that I was here because I really took this role seriously."

Cortes highlighted being a lifetime Lindsay resident, her kids live and go to school here, and that she wanted to show them how to follow through with a commitment made. She said her family roots run deep in Lindsay.

"I want to say thank you to my parents even though they are not here, for making Lindsay their home 45 years ago when they arrived from Michoacan, Mexico in search of an opportunity for a better life," Cortes said. "Lindsay offered them that opportunity and in turn, has offered that to me."

Cortes made sure to thank current and former city staff, and those that have stuck around in the not-so-good times.

"Persistence and determination is what has helped us to prevail," Cortes said. "Thanks to city administrators and staff. Thanks to you, our city is up and running, and we're moving in a great direction."

An audit reviewed in Dec. 2019 revealed the marked improved financial standing of the city of Lindsay, beginning to climb out of their stark 2017 general fund deficit of \$17.1 million to \$10.7 million in 2019.

Cortes said she's leaving public office to further her professional career and spend time with family, but she will continue to be involved in the community. She concluded her speech quoting the late first lady Jackie Kennedy.

"We should all do something to right the wrongs that we see, and not just complain about them," Cortes said.

FARMERSVILLE

On Dec. 14, Paul Boyer was selected as the new mayor of Farmersville, as Greg Gomez handed over the mayor gavel. Tina Hernandez was also named as the new vice mayor.

In the same meeting Rosa Vasquez stepped down from the council and was replaced by new council member Danny Valdovinos.

Boyer was pleasantly surprised to be chosen, but is looking forward to spending more time volunteering in the city. He grew up in the Bay Area in East Palo Alto before relocating to Farmersville in 1977 to begin work at Self-Help Enterprises. At the end of March, he will be retiring from his role as Community Development Program Director. That will allow him more time to focus on his new role as mayor during the remaining two years of his term.

"One thing I want to do when I retire is spend more time walking and biking around town. I want to get to know my community," Boyer said.

In February, the new board intends to have a strategic planning session so they can get on the same page and prioritize the highest needs for the city. There are several programs that will garner eminent interest from Boyer such as improving the roads and making them more pedestrian friendly. Downtown Farmersville will be the focus of other improvements in the city. The goal is to make the area look nicer, attracting more people to shop there which will help local businesses following the pandemic.

"I think that we're better off than we thought we were going to be throughout the pandemic. Cannabis revenue has helped us quite a bit," Boyer said.

Another focus for Boyer is the improvement of local parks, especially the new sports park. When high school sports are permitted to return, the council is still adamant about supporting a swim program at the high school.

An additional priority is the completing construction of the sewer treatment plant. With the city's waste water going into the new plant, that will give the board the capacity to have more jobs and housing in the city. It will also make the groundwater quality better for drinking.

WOODLAKE

The Woodlake City Council swore in the new councilmember, Florencio Guerra at their meeting on Dec. 14. At their first meeting of 2021 on Jan. 11, they will vote on their new mayor and vice mayor.