TIMESOC

Embattled mayor leads a strong showing by incumbents in Anaheim races



Anaheim Mayor Ashleigh Aitken is on the way to securing an outright majority in her reelection campaign. (Gina Ferazzi | Los Angeles Times)



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Anaheim Mayor Ashleigh Aitken appears headed to a second term with an outright majority despite a scandal that surfaced in September and has followed her reelection

bid ever since.

As of Thursday afternoon, Aitken earned roughly 57% of the vote, enough to maintain a sizable lead over her two lesser-known opponents, Dr. Imran Sharief and Alfredo Rodriguez.

In commenting on the early returns, the mayor sidestepped any acknowledgment of the controversy that arose when TimesOC first reported on a confidential legal letter that detailed allegations of racist remarks and harassment by Aitken against Berenice Ballinas, her chief of staff.

“Anaheim voters turned out in historic numbers and I am deeply humbled and grateful for the overwhelming support reflected in the results,” Aitken said. “Anaheim is my favorite place on earth, and serving it as its mayor is an honor. I believe these results reflect the hard work we are doing to move our city forward.”

A tort claim, which is a precursor to a lawsuit, filed with the city in September detailed more allegations against the mayor, including an incident where she allegedly called Ballinas a “dirty Mexican” and referred to a previous city manager by a pejorative word for a gay man after drinking at a city function.

The Anaheim Police Assn. and the conservative Lincoln Club of Orange County ran negative ads that highlighted the allegations against Aitken, a Democrat, through their respective independent expenditure committees.

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The police union spent more than $93,000 opposing the mayor's reelection, while the Lincoln Club's 1962 PAC spent $40,000.

Whether or not the negative ads had an impact is unknown, but Aitken dipped below 60% in subsequent vote tallies after election night.

Sharief, who is in third place with 11% of the vote, issued a statement on the race via social media and congratulated Aitken on her reelection.

"While the election results were not what we had hoped for, I am incredibly grateful to the thousands of Anaheim residents who placed their trust in me and supported our campaign," Sharief said. "Although this campaign has come to an end, my commitment to serving Anaheim has not. As a physician, a neighbor and a proud member of this community, I will continue working toward a healthier, safer and more prosperous Anaheim."

Rodriguez, who placed a distant second with almost 32% of the vote, did not issue a comment by press time.

Aitken isn't the only incumbent returning to the dais for a second term.

Councilmembers Carlos Leon and Natalie Meeks ran unopposed.

A contested election in District 3, the heart of Anaheim's Latino community, saw incumbent Councilmember Natalie Rubalcava emerge with a wide lead over her opponent, Elia Renteria-Garcia.

As of Thursday afternoon, Rubalcava held a 63% to 37% lead over Renteria-Garcia.

“I am incredibly proud of the positive campaign we ran and [am] deeply grateful to every voter who took the time to participate and make their voices heard,” Rubalcava said. “I am humbled by the outpouring of support and never take the trust of this community for granted.”

Funded by the police union and Anaheim resort hoteliers, an APA-sponsored PAC spent more than $150,000 supporting Rubalcava’s reelection.

Unite Here Local 11, a hotel workers union, spent $10,000 on canvassing in support of Renteria-Garcia and opposed to Rubalcava.

School board races



The Anaheim Union High School District headquarters in Anaheim on Wednesday, July 17, 2024. (Don Leach/Daily Pilot)

Two reform candidates spurred by proposed teacher layoffs at Anaheim Union High School District two years ago and concerns over district transparency and school safety, are trailing far behind incumbent trustees.

As of Thursday afternoon, AUHSD Area 1 Trustee Jessica Guerrero maintained a nearly 40-point advantage over Germaine Neumann, an outspoken critic of the teacher layoffs that were later shelved. Guerrero commands 58.5% of the vote to Nuemann's 19%.

Annemarie Randle-Trejo, an incumbent in Area 2, earned 61.5% of the vote, enough for a wide margin over her sole opponent, Roberto Garcia.

Incumbents are also fairing well Anaheim Elementary School District trustee contests.

Trustee Juan Gabriel Alvarez appears headed to another term in Area 2 with 60% of the vote over former AESD board president Jeff Cole.

Another contest reignited a past controversy.

Trustee Alva Alvarez was appointed to the school board last year to represent Area 4 after a board majority ousted Trustee Mark Lopez, who had also been elected to the North Orange County Community College District Board of Trustees.

Alva Alvarez is Juan Gabriel Alvarez's cousin.

Lopez's bid to win his seat back is falling short, as Alva Alvarez leads with 59% of the vote to his 41%.



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Gabriel San Román is a feature writer for TimesOC. He previously worked at OC Weekly until the newspaper's closing in late 2019. In 2023, San Román was part of the breaking news reporting team that was a Pulitzer finalist for its coverage of the Lunar New Year mass shooting in Monterey Park.

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