

Veronica Gonzales
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Rep. Verónica Gonzáles unfazed by GOP challenge

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With the political dust still settling from last summer's special sessions of the Texas Legislature, State Rep. Veronica Gonzáles, D-McAllen, was rudely welcomed back home in August by an alarming story in one of the Valley's largest newspapers.

According to the newspaper's account, Republicans are in a great position to defeat the House District 41 rookie state representative with one of their own.

After all, the 41-year-old San Marcos native and longtime McAllen lawyer represents a legislative district that includes some of the richest and presumably, Republican, voting strongholds in the Valley, such as southwest Edinburg and north McAllen.

She didn't even face a legitimate Republican opponent after her upset victory in the March 2004 party primary against Rep. Roberto Gutierrez, D-McAllen, who had picked up the public support of Speaker of the House Tom Craddick, the first Republican speaker in more than a century.

The local Republican candidate dropped out of the District 41 race soon after Craddick endorsed Gutierrez.

See GONZÁLES, page 11

GONZÁLES ...

Continued from page 1

Plus, the conventional logic went, GOP political architects in Austin had previously redrawn the physical boundaries of House District 41 in order to make it easy for a Republican candidate to finally win a state legislative race in Hidalgo County.

Not so fast, Gonzáles told enthusiastic supporters at her Nov. 17 re-election campaign kick-off, which was held at the Embassy Suites in McAllen.

She threw down the political gauntlet at the GOP, getting key Republican leaders to support her with their financial backing.

She also pulled off an impressive political balancing act by featuring McAllen Mayor Richard Cortez, who has strong Republican ties, and Edinburg Mayor Richard Garcia, the leader of the heavily-Democratic three-time All-America City, who both endorsed her candidacy.

"To those who say that they are going to find me an opponent because the lines of this district were redrawn especially for a Republican to serve in it, I say that I am a Democrat, and I am very proud to be a Democrat," the first-term lawmaker told several hundred cheering supporters.

She emphasized that she didn't favor one segment of her district over any other, saying she sought to "benefit all of my diversity.

"People jokingly refer to my district as 'the wine and cheese district,' and I am glad that we have an area that is growing affluent," the McAllen lawyer said. "But I just don't represent people in the gated communities of north McAllen or Sharyland or southwest Edinburg. I also represent people who live in colonias, who do back-breaking work every-day to put food on the table."

Her efforts in Austin earned her recognition by the Mexican American Legislative Caucus as "Freshman of the Year," and her legislative colleagues, including Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, D-McAllen, Rep. Aaron Peña, D-Edinburg, and Rep. Armando "Mando" Martinez, D-Weslaco, endorsed her reelection bid as well.

The McAllen mayor focused on Gonzáles' strength of character, saying she was a "person of principle, a person who has courage. I can't think of anyone better than Veronica. She has shown and proven that to us."

Garcia, who in Gonzáles' first campaign had supported James Selman, III, praised the self-proclaimed business attorney for her effectiveness in the state legislature.

"We hear that someone from another party may want to field a candidate for this position, but I have a message for them - we don't need them," Garcia said. "Why in the world would we want to change? They can't do better than Veronica."

Some of her key legislative successes included measures which:

- Require local governments to post their agendas and agenda packets on the Internet;
- Provide funding for street lights in colonias;
- Increase pay for jurors from \$6 a day to \$40 a day;
- Create a new district court and a new county court-at-law for Hidalgo County;
- Allow community college students to pay their summer tuition in installments; and
- Increase the age eligibility of police officer candidates in order to expand the pool of

talent to serve in law enforcement.

In addition to Garcia, some of the other Edinburg leaders who showed up at her campaign kick-off were City Councilmember Eddie Cisneros-Johnson, Edinburg school board trustee Gilbert Enriquez, City Attorney Daniel Rios, City Public Information Director Evelyn Castellano Escamilla, former Edinburg City Council member Ricardo Rodriguez, Jr., and former Edinburg City Councilmember Arnoldo Benavides.