

Hidalgo County state reps file for reelection bids

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One of the more powerful legislative delegations in recent Valley history came together Wednesday morning at the Hidalgo County Democratic Party headquarters in Pharr to jointly file for reelection to the Texas House of Representatives.

The event, coordinated by county Democratic Party chairman Juan Maldonado, featured Upper Valley state legislators Rep. Aaron Peña, D-Edinburg, Rep. Verónica Gonzáles, D-McAllen, Rep. Ismael "Kino" Flores, D-Palmview, and Rep. Armando "Mando" Martínez, D-Weslaco.

Rep. Ryan Guillen, D-Rio Grande City, filed his paperwork in Austin for a third two-year term as House District 31 lawmaker the day before, then traveled back to the Valley to join fellow colleagues for their December 7 early morning ceremony.

The gathering at the party local headquarters represented some heavy hitters, including a chairman of a major legislative committee and three members of the state budget-writing House Appropriations Committee.

Peña, also seeking his third two-year term, predicted a sweep in 2006 for Hidalgo County Democratic state representatives.

"The entire Hidalgo County legislative delegation, all incumbent Democrats, are all filed in and ready to go," Peña reflected. "Most of us are prepared for opponents but none are expected. Save one that is, there is of course talk that a Republican may run against Rep. Verónica Gonzáles."

Party primary filings began on Saturday, December 3, and end on Monday, January 2, for the March 7 Democratic and Republican party primaries. The general election is in early November.

The gathering represented a first in recent memory for local Democrats. Although they remain strong in the Rio Grande Valley, they are part of a political party that is out of power at the statewide level.

So entrenched is the Republican Party in the state's highest offices -- there are no Democrats holding statewide office -- that privately, some of the local legislators expressed concern that the state Democratic Party will field no candidates in some statewide races.

Meanwhile, at the local level, Flores dismissed rumors that he had placed campaign billboards in Starr County, which is outside his state legislative district, but which is part of incumbent Congressman Lloyd Doggett's federal District 25.

In late 2003 and early 2004, Flores seriously considered challenging Doggett when, as a result of congressional redistricting, western Hidalgo County and Starr County, along with several counties stretching northward towards central Texas, were thrown into the newly redrawn House District 25.

Doggett filed for the reshaped House District 25, which included portions of his home base of Austin, but after much speculation, Flores decided against running against the former Texas Supreme Court justice and longtime Austin congressman.

In March 2004, Doggett defeated Democratic challenger and former Hidalgo County District Judge Leticia Hinojosa, then was victorious in the November 2004 general election over former Public Utilities Commission chairwoman and GOP opponent Becky Armendáriz Klein.

Earlier in the week, Flores laid out his accomplishments, taking care to note that his nine years of experience in the House was good not only for his House District 36, which includes Pharr, south McAllen and southwestern Hidalgo County, but for the entire Valley.

"2005 set the stage for Texas with new hopes and new opportunities," said Flores, who is seeking reelection to a sixth two-year term. "This is the time to continue our partnership between the people and the government. Our partnership will keep the Valley and Texas with a government that is the hallmark of accountability, stability and integrity."

Rubén Longoria, Flores' chief-of-staff in Austin, said Flores has a proven track record of delivering for deep South Texas.

"Democrats and Republicans alike acknowledge that Rep. Flores has learned the legislative process and works well with the top state leadership," said Longoria, an Edinburg native who has almost 15 years experience as a top legislative staffer. "His friendships with key legislative leaders and top elected state officials give District 36 and the Rio Grande Valley a big advantage in successfully passing legislation and seeking state funds for new programs."

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