

# GOP leaders seek opponent for McAllen District 41 seat

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AUSTIN — Republicans are ready to claim the North McAllen district they helped draw after the 2000 Census.

It was just five years ago that the current Texas House District 41 was born when the Hidalgo County Republican Party hired an Austin consultant to redraw its boundaries around North McAllen. When the Legislature

couldn't agree on the boundaries, a five-member redistricting committee considered the consultant's map and approved it by a 3-2 vote exactly as local Republicans wanted it.

Now, Hidalgo County Republican Party Chairman Hollis Rutledge said party leaders plan to meet this week to try to find someone qualified and willing to run against freshman state Rep. Veronica Gonzales, D-McAllen, for the most conservative-leaning district in

the Rio Grande Valley.

Rutledge said "nothing is set in concrete," but they hope to have an opponent ready before the Jan. 2 filing deadline.

"The district is very much a conservative district, and we anticipate, Lord willing, to field a candidate that is going to be reputable and strong," Rutledge said. "We feel very confident that the district that we carved is the perfect situation for us to

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## Texas House District 41 by the numbers:

- \$94,915 average value of owner-occupied homes
- 8.8 percent unemployment rate
- 56.6 percent of voters for President George W. Bush in 2004
- 46.5 percent of voters for Gov. Rick Perry in 2002
- One number of terms served by incumbent Democrat Rep. Veronica Gonzales

Sources:

U.S. Census and Texas Legislative Council

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field a candidate for the Republicans and win."

Gonzales has often said she is mindful of her district's diversity and worked hard to represent voters in her district.

"It disappoints me because I know that I have done well and did a really good job, and I'm real proud that people come up to me and tell me I am representing them well," she said on Thursday. "So if an opponent wants to run, they need to understand that they're running against someone who's committed."

District 41 is an anomaly in the staunchly Democratic, mostly low- and middle-income Hidalgo County. The district includes the upscale North McAllen neighborhoods and estates of Sharyland and southern Edinburg. One-third of households make more than \$50,000 a year, more than twice

the median income of all Hidalgo County households.

They vote in Democratic primaries, but don't shy from Republican candidates when given the choice. It was the only Texas House district in Hidalgo County to vote for President George W. Bush in 2004, helping give him 56.6 percent of the vote.

If a Republican took the seat, he or she would be the only one among 10 state legislators representing the Valley. Since the District was redrawn to favor Republicans, though, no Democrat has faced a challenge from a Republican in a general election.

In 2002, longtime Democratic incumbent Roberto Gutierrez, who is Rutledge's first cousin, went unopposed in the general election. In 2004, Gutierrez lost to Gonzales in the primary, and Gonzales' Republican opponent Roy Ibañez dropped out of the race before the general election.

When contacted last week, Ibañez said he does not plan to

run again, in part because of the frustration he felt when the state Republican Party did not contribute funds to his campaign despite assurances they would.

"After what the state Republican Party and the state legislative leaders, how they conducted themselves, I don't think I'd opt to throw the hat in the race," Ibañez said.

A spokeswoman with the Republican Party of Texas did not know the specifics of the 2004 race, but said the party offers money and training to candidates across the state, including those in Democratic strongholds.

"The trend throughout the state has been that it's leaning Republican, so it's my belief that no stone will be left unturned," said spokeswoman Jennifer Webster. "I mean, we will try hard to get the message as far and wide as possible."

Rutledge said the promise was never in stone from the state party. He thinks if Hidalgo County selects a strong candi-

date next year, the state party might step in to help.

"Once we got through that process, well, then, we obviously state our case to the state party and hopefully they will assist us in however they can," Rutledge said.

Another potential candidate, McAllen Republican Ernest Aliseda, said he has is not sure whether he will run for the seat. Aliseda is a municipal court judge in McAllen, a private attorney and district director for the State Bar of Texas.

"I'll be honest with you, I haven't considered it, so I can't really rule it out without discussing it with my family and my partners and everybody else," Aliseda said.

One issue the party plans to address in a campaign against Gonzales is her criticism in the 2004 campaign of House Speaker Tom Craddick, R-Midland. Rutledge said the party plans to scour her voting record to see how often she voted with the leadership.

Gonzales said she and Craddick get along well, but they each know they must vote for their district interests.

She consistently voted with other Democratic Valley lawmakers on most major legislation considered this year and joined all Democrats and some Republicans in defeating the speaker-backed education and tax plans, which proved to be unpopular among most Valley educators and voters. After two special sessions, Republican leaders were left without a school-finance plan and without property tax relief.

"I had a fine relationship with (Craddick) and worked well with both parties, and that's why I got major legislation passed to benefit my constituents," she said.

That the Republican Party in Hidalgo County is searching for an opponent rather than presenting a strong opponent suggests they want party representation more than quality representation, she said.

"Hollis — and some other

Republican friends — has been looking for someone to run against me before I even took office, and that indicates to me that they are not interested in having someone do a good job, but they are interested in party labels," Gonzales said.

Rutledge said he thinks highly of Gonzales, but thinks the one-party system in Hidalgo County is as bad for voters as a monopoly would be in business.

"(This) district is not necessarily Republican, but I can assure you that it's not Democratic by any stretch of the imagination," Rutledge said. "That district is very sophisticated in the way they vote, and they are very independent in the way they vote."

The primary races are in March. The general election is in November.

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