

Valley Republicans still searching for a candidate to take on Gonzales

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Steve Taylor

McALLEN - Republican Party officials in Hidalgo County look set to ignore the advice of local business leaders and find a GOP general election opponent for state Rep. Veronica Gonzales, D-McAllen.

With just a few days left before the Jan. 2, 2006, filing deadline, Hidalgo County Republican Party Chairman Hollis Rutledge said he did not want to mention any potential candidates for House District 41 but did acknowledge that McAllen businessman and former Channel 4 News anchor Roy Martinez was being talked about.

"Unlike our state representative, Roy was born and reared in the community," Rutledge said, pointing out that Gonzales hails from San Marcos.

Many Valley business leaders have gone on record as supporting Gonzales, including McAllen Mayor Richard Cortez, Glen Roney, Bob Bogguss, Mark Talbot, Troy Gerahart, and Raudel Garza.

Some, like Cortez, have privately sought to dissuade Republicans from mounting a challenge to Gonzales. They feel Gonzales has star quality and a great legislative career ahead of her.

"I can understand what the business leaders are saying and I respect their opinion," Rutledge said. "But, my job as a party official is to promote the party and to try to identify qualified candidates who might want to dedicate themselves to public service."

When the Republican-controlled Legislative Redistricting Board was redrawing House districts in 2001, former Republican Party of Texas State Director Royal Masset helped Rutledge configure new boundary lines for District 41 to maximize GOP voting strength.

Republicans sat out the 2003 election, allowing Gonzales an uncontested general election victory after she had defeated veteran incumbent Roberto Gutierrez in a Democratic primary runoff.

"As you know, we created that district and now it is even more competitive than it was before," Rutledge said. "We've got about 35 or 40 subdivisions that have popped up since then. All about the data we've been getting gives us even more encouragement than when we created it."

Rutledge believes a two-party system in the Valley could only assist in weakening the politiquera system and voter fraud. He also thinks having a Republican House member at a time when the GOP is in charge at the state and federal level would help the Valley secure more government funding.

"I keep saying this. If we are going to get anywhere in the Valley we have to establish a strong, two-party, system. We have to become more sophisticated," Rutledge said.

"It's no different than trying to create competition in a free enterprise system. The more competition, the better it is for the consumer. The more competition politically, the better it is for the voters. Ultimately, the ones that will win are the community, including the business community."

Rutledge said he was not confirming Martinez's interest in the seat. "Roy does have good name ID. But, some others have expressed interest. Who knows, we may have some last minute surprises," he said.

Gonzales has said any Republican representing District 41 would be put in the awkward position of voting his or her district or backing the House leadership. Based on her experience during the 79th session, Gonzales said those demands were not compatible.

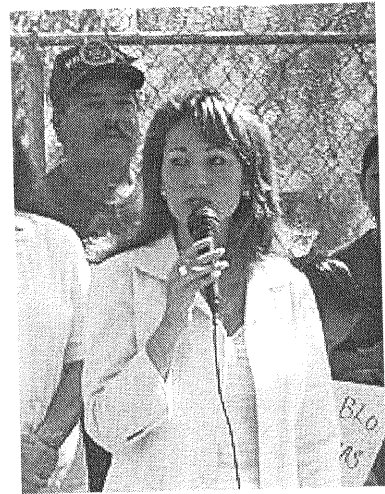
"I would hate to be put in that position of being put in the corner and having to choose between party and what's right for the district," Gonzales told the *Guardian*, at her campaign kickoff reception last month.

Gonzales said any potential opponent should realize just how much time and effort is required in being a good state representative. She also said she was grateful for the support of many in the business community.

"I don't think it's wise to ignore any influential group in the community, especially in a district that is growing so quickly and has so many varied business interests," Gonzales said. "I would hope Republicans would work with me in helping this district secure all the funding we can. But, whatever happens, I am ready. I am ready to launch a vigorous campaign, if necessary."

Gonzales also disputed the notion that the development of lots of new wealthy subdivisions in north McAllen automatically meant lots of new Republican voters. "This district has a lot of independent voters who look at the candidate. And remember, Lloyd Doggett won this district in 2004."

After her debut legislative session, Gonzales was named joint Legislator of the Year by the Mexican American Legislative Caucus. She authored or joint-authored 23 bills and co-authored eight bills. Among the bills she is most proud of are the formation of a new state district court in Hidalgo County and funding for street lighting in colonias.



State Rep. Veronica Gonzales