

May 16, 2010

John Benoit our choice for 4th District

The Desert Sun

Voters in the 4th District of the Riverside County Board of Supervisors are fortunate. The two candidates for the post, John Benoit and Gary Jeandron, are excellent choices.

The Desert Sun supports Benoit because of his seven years in the California Legislature as an assemblyman and then a state senator and his seven months on the job as supervisor.

Jeandron told our editorial board his lack of statehouse experience was an asset to his candidacy, that he was not “tainted” by the partisan bickering in Sacramento.

Not that he didn't try. He lost the 2008 race for the 80th Assembly District to V. Manuel Pérez, 52.9 percent to 47.1 percent.

Benoit and Jeandron preached the same political verse in their endorsement interviews, supporting public safety, fiscal restraint and education.

They also have similar backgrounds. Both had long careers in law enforcement. Benoit worked for the California Highway Patrol for 28 years, retiring as commander of the Indio station in 2001. Jeandron was with the Palm Springs Police Department for 29 years, retiring as chief in 2008.

Both have served on school boards — Benoit with Desert Sands Unified from 1999 to 2002, Jeandron with Palm Springs Unified from 2002 to the present. His term expires this year, but he's not expected to announce whether he'll run again until after June 8.

And, although the supervisor job is nonpartisan, both are conservative Republicans.

Successor to Roy Wilson

When Wilson, who had served as the 4th District supervisor for 15 years, stepped down from the board in August because of health problems, he suggested Benoit as his successor.

Within a week after announcing his retirement, Wilson died.

All four remaining supervisors endorsed Benoit. The Desert Sun also endorsed him.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed Benoit but delayed the announcement until November to save the cost of an extra election to fill his seat in the Senate.

Pensions

Pensions contribute to the \$100 million shortfall in the county budget.

“We need to change the system,” Benoit said. “We cannot abrogate promises already made ... but we cannot continue to make those promises.”

Jeandron has a unique perspective on pensions, having been on both sides of the table as police chief and negotiating on behalf of police unions.

“When you come at people and start taking their benefits — just arbitrarily start taking them — it's going to damage morale and productivity,” he said.

This exchange prompted Benoit to point out that Jeandron has received 87 percent of his campaign contributions from the Riverside Sheriffs' Association and other employee unions.

Jeandron countered that Benoit promised the Service Employees International Union he wouldn't touch their pensions.

Both retired officers benefit from pensions. We're not convinced either will be strident leaders for pension reform, but if you believe the rhetoric, Benoit is a better bet.

Immigration

Neither candidate came out in support Arizona's pending law that will allow officers to check the immigration status of criminal suspects.

Both said the federal government should do a better job of securing the borders and that it is inappropriate for deputy sheriffs to go beyond basic ID checks, saying they have enough to do fighting crime.

The Whitewater Detention Center

Both candidates support the 7,200-bed jail off Interstate 10 in Whitewater.

Benoit said that without adequate jail space, criminals are serving less than 15 percent of their sentences. He also said it makes sense to have a jail centrally located.

The Desert Sun has opposed the location because the potential impact on the Coachella Valley's \$1 billion tourism industry.

“What will impact this is crime,” Jeandron said. Benoit said there would be no signs warning drivers not to pick up hitchhikers, as there are near prisons.

Budget cuts and jobs

Both candidates said the county must place a priority on jobs through school career pathway programs, tax incentives and by supporting the Coachella Valley Economic Blueprint.

Jeandron said the county should not make cuts in planning and health inspection to the point that it hinders business.

Benoit said he was proud of a recent resolution that encourages employers working with county contracts to hire local workers.

Both agreed that public safety should take a smaller proportion of budget cuts than other departments.

A little mud

While the conversation with Benoit and Jeandron was mostly civil, Jeandron pointed out that Benoit broke state law by including his photo on fliers promoting a foreclosure workshop. Benoit reimbursed the county \$8,500 for the fliers.

Benoit questioned Jeandron's ethics for signing for a home loan in Indio as his principal residence, six months after doing the same thing for a home in Palm Springs.

When The Desert Sun questioned whether living in the Indio home would violate his residency requirement to serve on the Palm Springs Unified board, he said just his wife lived there and it was an effort to help his daughter and their newborn granddaughter.

The Indio home entered the early stages of foreclosure, but Jeandron said he would resolve the \$11,807 balance soon.

Both were unfortunate incidents but not blatant ethical violations that should eliminate either candidate from consideration.

The Riverside Sheriffs' Association — Jeandron supporters — has now come out with attack ads against Benoit on television and radio, similar to the incessant exchanges between Meg Whitman and Steve Poizner. That kind of campaigning is what makes people hate politics. We hope Benoit does not respond in kind.

Benoit is our choice

Benoit and Jeandron are solid candidates with a firm grasp of the issues. But the 4th District county supervisor is the most important office for the Coachella Valley. Working with a team of just five board members, a supervisor can be much more influential on our daily lives than a state senator or an Assembly member in Sacramento.

Benoit was an effective legislator. As a supervisor, he has worked well with fellow Supervisor Marion Ashley, wisely pushed for more road construction while costs are down, helped create Travel and Tourism Week in conjunction with U.S. Travel Rally Day last week and attended dozens of community functions. This the natural advantage of an incumbent, but it adds up to experience Jeandron doesn't have.

The Desert Sun goes with Benoit because of his significant edge in experience over Jeandron and encourages voters to keep him in this important position.