

Democrats for Equality Endorse Alvarez for Mayor

Close-Fought Meeting Features Mayors Past, Present and Possibly Future

by MARK GABRISH CONLAN

At their regular meeting September 26, the San Diego Democrats for Equality gave District Eight City Councilmember David Alvarez their endorsement for Mayor of San Diego in the November 19 special election to replace Bob Filner, the progressive Democrat who left office August 30 after being accused of sexual harassment of women. Alvarez fell one vote short of the 60 percent threshold for an endorsement on the first ballot and won on the second, after a contentious but polite meeting lasting 2 ½ hours that featured mayors past, present and — at least the club’s members hope — future.



Todd Gloria

The past mayor was Filner; the present mayor — interim mayor, anyway — was District Three City Councilmember Todd Gloria. He’d actually been invited to speak at the club’s September meeting last May, at which time neither Gloria nor the club’s board had any idea he’d be holding any office other than the ones he held when they invited him: Councilmember and City Council president. But Filner’s resignation put Gloria in the position of interim mayor, in which he will serve until March, when the winner of the special election will take office.

Filner came up early in Gloria’s speech when he thanked the club for calling for Filner’s resignation in July, two weeks after the sexual harassment allegations against him first surfaced. “I know that that was incredibly difficult to do,” he said. “I know that for those of us who worked incredibly hard to elect Bob Filner Mayor, it was hard to come forward and speak that truth. But it was the right thing to do to make sure that our movement, our effort to make San Diego a more progressive place, did not die with the man, but that we could move it forward together.”

Gloria said that rather than “put the city in neutral” until the next duly elected mayor takes office, he would seek to “get things done.” One of the accomplishments he pointed to was the City Council’s recent approval of a new plan for Barrio Logan “that respected both industry and neighborhoods.” He also cited Councilmember Sherri Lightner’s proposed ban on plastic grocery bags, and an affordable-housing proposal that would restore the city’s so-called “linkage fee” — a charge to developers of market-rate and high-end housing developments that was supposed to go into a Housing Trust Fund to build affordable housing, but instead since the 1990’s has been regularly raided by the city to close the gaps in its general budget.

Among the other initiatives Gloria promoted are a city response to climate change, the opening of the new central library, and a plan for the expansion of San Diego’s convention center which the California Coastal Commission will consider October 10. “It’s an important project, supported by business and labor,” Gloria said — but most of the questions Gloria got from the audience looked skeptically at this project. Gloria said the expansion will be funded partly by the city, partly by the port, and partly by a so-called “assessment district” to which hotel owners will contribute based on their proximity to the center: one, two or three cents per dollar in additional occupancy taxes on their guests’ bills depending on how close they are to downtown.

But the assessment district has already been challenged in court, and, asked if Gloria has a Plan B in case it's ruled illegal, all Gloria could say was, "There may be other options. We believe the legal process coincides nicely with our development process, and we are confident we will finish construction by 2018."

Gloria also got quite a few questions about when city services will be expanded — when sidewalks and streets will be fixed, the bathrooms at Mission Bay opened again, and hours at branch libraries extended after they were cut years ago. He blamed all these problems on the city's major budget deficits, which confronted him and the other Councilmembers who took office in 2009.

"When you run for office, you tell the voters about all the wonderful things you want to do, but when Sherri (Lightner), Marti (Emerald) and I got on the Council we immediately had to cut \$170 million from the city budget." Gloria explained. "That's why the bathrooms were locked up. We have to maintain the fiscal discipline to restore what we cut, and since the city's employees stood with us in the sacrifices, they should share in the restorations."

The Candidates Speak — In Shifts

The original plan for the meeting had been to present all four major Democratic candidates for mayor — Alvarez, former Assemblymember Nathan Fletcher, former San Diego City Attorney Mike Aguirre



Nathan Fletcher

and businessman and historical preservationist Bruce Coons — at once and have them answer written questions. But the *San Diego Voice and Viewpoint*, an African-American community newspaper, also scheduled a forum for mayoral candidates September 26, and the four candidates juggled their schedules differently to accommodate both events. Fletcher and Coons arrived at 7:45 and had their portion of the forum, including opening and closing statements as well as opportunities to answer five questions Carla Kirkwood, the club's Vice President for Political Action, had written based on those submitted by the audience.

Alvarez and Aguirre came to the club's meeting almost an hour later, and former San Diego County Democratic Party chair Maureen Steiner made a motion to allow them to answer the same five questions Kirkwood had earlier put to Fletcher and Coons. A few club members actually opposed this. Former club president Stephen Whitburn basically said all four candidates had had their chance to speak to the club, and two had taken advantage of it while the other two apparently felt it was more important to speak to another organization. But the club voted overwhelmingly to allow Alvarez and Aguirre to answer the questions, though they weren't allowed to make opening and closing statements and were given less time to speak to each question than Fletcher and Coons.

Fletcher, who ran for Mayor in 2012, started his campaign as a Republican, then re-registered without a party affiliation after the County Republican Party endorsed Carl DeMaio over him, and subsequently re-registered Democratic after he lost in the primary to DeMaio and Filner, recalled the issue that started his break with the Republican Party. In 2010, two years after he won his Assembly seat as a Republican, "there was a resolution on the floor to ask Congress to repeal the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy" which kept LGBT people from serving openly in the military.

"That was an issue I knew well," Fletcher, a former Marine, said. "When I served in peacetime, it was dumb; when I served in wartime, it was dumb; and when I served in the Assembly, it was dumb. So I shared with my fellow Republicans that I would give a speech on the matter, but it would not be the speech they expected or wanted. That was the beginning of the end of my seven-year failed relationship with the GOP."



Bruce Coons

“Only one month ago, I wasn’t thinking of running for Mayor,” said Coons. “But I didn’t see anyone who would carry Bob [Filner]’s progressive agenda forward, and I still don’t. There are three questions the Mayor should be asking: what do the residents say, what do the community groups say, and most importantly, what does it do for the quality of life for *all* residents of San Diego, no matter where they live?”

Because he’s best known as the head of Save Our Heritage Organization (SOHO), aimed at preserving the city’s historic buildings, many commentators on the race have written off Coons as a one-issue candidate. So he stressed his business background — “I’ve built a company from zero to \$30 million in five years” — as qualification for the managerial responsibilities of the office under San Diego’s relatively new strong-mayor charter.

Kirkwood’s questions for the candidates were: 1) What had they personally done for LGBT equality, specifically to defeat California’s anti-marriage equality initiative Proposition 8? 2) What is their vision of the city’s need for housing growth, including helping homeless people and possibly instituting rent control? 3) Would any of them support amending the City Charter to allow Irwin Jacobs’ Balboa Park bypass plan, including a paid parking garage in the park, to go through after the courts invalidated it? 4) What would they do about the city’s estimated \$1 billion worth of infrastructure needs? 5) Should California pursue big-box stores as a means of development and job creation?

Since all four candidates had scored 100 percent on the club’s issues questionnaire — Coons even joked it had been one of the easiest of any organization’s for him to answer — their answers had more to do with their personal styles and commitments than anything else. Coons reminded the audience that SOHO had been founded by the late gay artist Robert Miles Parker. Fletcher talked about his support for SB 48, the bill passed by the California legislature that requires public schools to teach about the achievements of LGBT people, and called LGBT rights “*the* civil-rights issue of our time.”

Aguirre said that as city attorney he had prepared the legal opinion, later approved by the City Council, that put the city officially on record against Proposition 8 when it was challenged in the courts. He also pointed to his successful defense of the city in a lawsuit filed by four firefighters who claimed their civil rights had been violated when they were ordered to appear in a Pride parade and said they were sexually harassed by attendees. Alvarez said he had personally contributed money to keep the San Diego LGBT Community Center open after the Center was ruled ineligible for Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funding from the city.

On the housing question, all four candidates ducked the part about rent control. Some emphasized the issue of residential growth in general and others focused on the part of the question about how to deal with homeless people. “We have to get serious about our housing needs,” said Fletcher. “We’re 52 unique neighborhoods and we need to develop them in their own ways. I was the first mayoral candidate who put out a bike plan. We need to make it possible for people to live, work and shop in their neighborhoods.” He said he’d first encountered the homelessness issue working with homeless veterans and was happy to see the city set up a year-round shelter — an accomplishment Gloria had also hailed.

Coons cited the high rents in San Diego — “over \$2,000 for a two-bedroom apartment” — and said he hoped to solve the affordable-housing problem by going after federal grants to convert historic buildings into low-cost housing.

“I voted to restore the linkage fee, cut in 1996, to have a bigger amount of money in the Housing

Trust Fund,” said Alvarez. “I was homeless for a few months when I was a senior in high school. I supported the year-round shelter, even in my backyard, because I believe it’s the right thing to do.”



Mike Aguirre

“As city attorney, I issued a legal opinion that we would not prosecute people for being homeless unless there was available shelter for them,” said Aguirre. “We have to catch people falling out of jobs and focus on temporary or short-term homeless (people). The obvious solution is providing jobs. The city should be the employer of last resort.”

On the question of the Balboa Park bypass, Coons reminded the group that SOHO had filed the lawsuit that led to the project’s demise. He said “you couldn’t even have *walked* through Balboa Park” if the Jacobs project had been built. “We fought the Mayor and Irwin (Jacobs) and we won. They said they were going to crush us and get my friends fired. Later on, at the end, they said, ‘You fought the good fight. We’ll give you a seat at the big boys’ table.’ But they found out I can’t be bought.”

“I don’t see anyone bringing this back,” said Fletcher, who supported the project the last time he ran for Mayor in 2012. Aguirre said he’d opposed it from the get-go. Alvarez acknowledged he’d voted to approve the Jacobs plan as a Councilmember but, like Fletcher, admitted the issue was over — especially since the much simpler alternative Mayor Filner pushed through to get cars out of

the Plaza de Panama worked.

Regarding the city’s estimated \$1 billion infrastructure needs, Fletcher said it’s probably higher than that estimate. “We have to consider all the financing options,” he said. “We have to figure out how much we owe, how we can do it, and then put together a financing plan. ... Bob [Filner] rightly talked about investing in neighborhoods and communities that have been left behind. It’s going in and rebuilding our city.”

Coons said San Diego should follow the example of Phoenix, which got their voters to fund infrastructure repairs by slicing the financing into three separate bond measures and not asking voters to approve the next one in sequence until the work on the previous one had been completed. “We have to make new developments pay their fair share and *not* use the money for something else,” he said. “We also have to continue finding ways to save money at the city.”

“My priorities are to start the San Diego Water Project (an attempt to make the city’s water supply independent of the Metropolitan Water District, which is dominated by Los Angeles), repair sidewalks and bridges, and get libraries open,” said Aguirre. He boasted of his success in helping reduce the city’s pension costs and said that’s where the savings would come from that could be invested in infrastructure.

Like Fletcher, Alvarez said the city’s real infrastructure needs are probably higher than the \$1 billion estimate, which he said reflected only “deferred” — that is, fixing roads, sidewalks and other existing infrastructure that has been allowed to deteriorate. He said there’s probably about an additional \$2 billion in infrastructure the city needs but doesn’t have at all. But he warned that the city will have to regain the trust of voters before it can hope to get them to pass multi-billion dollar bond measures for infrastructure.

On the big-box store issue — Walmart in particular — Fletcher said the current management of Walmart has betrayed the original vision of founder Sam Walton, who paid his workers relatively high wages and sold only products made in the U.S. “I think we need to do a full economic-impact study on these big-box stores,” he said. “Don’t ban them across the board but ask the questions about their

economic impacts.”

The San Diego City Council actually passed an ordinance that would have done just that, but then rescinded it after Walmart supporters, bankrolled by the company, got enough signatures to force a public vote — and a similar bill was passed by the state legislature but vetoed by Governor Jerry Brown. Aguirre said that as city attorney he had written the local version of this bill — and criticized former City Councilmember Donna Frye for having cast the deciding vote to rescind it.

“I fought with the people in Barrio Logan against the Walmart there,” said Coons. “I think it’s a tragedy and another blot on the American system when one of our most profitable employers has most of their employees on the dole.”

“It depends on which big-box stores,” said Alvarez. “If you’re talking about (ones that pay) poverty-level wages, no. If we don’t give people *good* jobs, it’s not a development policy; it’s a corporate giveaway. We need to develop our neighborhoods with good jobs.”



David Alvarez

The Club’s Debate: Who’s Electable?

The debate over the endorsement turned less on any differences between the candidates and more on some sharp disagreements between members on which candidate would have the best chance of beating City Councilmember Kevin Faulconer, who was anointed the sole major Republican candidate at a secret meeting of 36 power brokers on August 31. (See the article by *Los Angeles Times* San Diego County bureau chief Tony Perry at: <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-san-diego-mayor-20130924,0,1310610.story>)

Club member David Warmoth put his finger on the problem facing Democrats in the race: “Republicans outvote Democrats in primary elections and special elections, and this one is both.” He said he favored Alvarez partly because he “is the closest thing to me in my beliefs,” but also because he thought the prospect of electing San Diego’s first Latino mayor since California was still part of Mexico would help excite the Democratic base.

Matt Corrales, speaking for Fletcher, said, “We’re not going to elect someone who’s the strongest liberal. We need someone

who can pull Republicans and independents. We need to support a *strong* Democrat. That man is Nathan Fletcher.”

Though she had been reported in *CityBeat* magazine as supporting Alvarez, former San Diego Democratic chair Maureen Steiner made a surprise plea for the club not to endorse in the race at all. “If you knew nothing about the candidates other than what you heard tonight, you’d have a hard time making a choice,” she explained. “So I’d rather do no endorsement and go home.”

The club took two votes on the race. On the first ballot, Alvarez got 39 votes to 24 for Fletcher, one for Coons and two for no endorsement — leaving Alvarez with 59.5 percent, one vote shy of the 60 percent needed to endorse. On the second ballot, Alvarez got 36 votes to 18 for Fletcher, giving him the endorsement.