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News | San Diego
ANALYSIS

Sunroad fiasco may shake up race for mayor

By Matthew T. Hall
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Mayor Jerry Sanders won the job two years ago by touting himself as the candidate with the integrity and management skills to move San Diego beyond the tumult and scandal that had darkened its sunny reputation nationwide.

Now, with his re-election campaign ramping up, he's increasingly on the defensive about his handling of a campaign contributor's troubled office-tower project and trying to deflect criticism from the two rivals who may turn the June 2008 mayoral primary into a repeat of the three-horse race in 2005.



Mayor Jerry Sanders

This week, millionaire businessman Steve Francis and Councilwoman Donna Frye are champing at the bit because of the sudden departure of Sanders' land-use chief and mounting criticism of a report authored by the mayor's office to document how an office tower was allowed to exceed a federal height limit.

Conflicting stories from the mayor's office Tuesday had Jim Waring leaving because he was fired, resigned or pressured to resign, the latest in a string of inconsistencies in official statements related to the Sunroad Enterprises tower near Montgomery Field.

Some political consultants say the mounting discrepancies undermine the image that Sanders successfully cultivated to become mayor: That he's a man of strong ethics and will, worthy of San Diegans' trust.

But Sanders strategist Tom Shepard said the Sunroad situation will not elevate beyond a distraction so long as the mayor can deliver on his main campaign promise to restore the city's credit rating and fiscal health.

Frye and Francis ran against Sanders in 2005 for the right to finish former Mayor Dick Murphy's second term. Sanders put up billboards promising "decisions in open meetings, not behind closed doors," and in the runoff repeatedly challenged Frye's integrity and called himself the more forthright.

From a campaign standpoint, even the slightest dent in his credibility could lead to fewer campaign contributions or endorsements for Sanders among influential business leaders whose support can come in bunches.

It may even stir second thoughts among some in the Republican

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establishment who have lined up behind Sanders as the incumbent, said Cynthia Vicknair, a Republican strategist who helped Murphy become mayor in 2000.

“People who would normally not have invited Steve in to chat for a long time about the possibility of him becoming mayor are now beginning to say, ‘Well, maybe I should talk to him. This thing may be going south at City Hall,’” she said.

San Diego races are nonpartisan but party affiliation can play a major role in fundraising and volunteerism.

It's highly unlikely that Sanders, who secured early support from the county Republican Party, would face a credible challenge other than Francis' self-funded campaign from his right flank. But the evolving Sunroad story line opens the mayor to new attacks from the left side of the political spectrum.

“Labor and the environmental community and the Democrats each are going to re-examine the idea that Jerry Sanders is a lock for mayor and are going to start looking around” for a candidate to support, longtime labor consultant Larry Remer said.

These segments of San Diego are expected to rally around Frye if she runs because of her broad base of support and wide name recognition. Consultants say it's already too late for anyone without similar strengths to run.

Sanders has sought to deflect criticism for months since the city allowed Sunroad to build an office tower that exceeded a 160-foot height limit in Kearny Mesa by 20 feet. The company is run by executives who contributed \$3,600 to Sanders' mayoral campaign, including an owner who held a fundraiser for him. The height limit was imposed to protect planes in bad-weather landings at nearby Montgomery Field, which is in Frye's district.

So what's new? Media dissections of an administration report that laid out what went wrong found errors and omissions in the report. And Waring is out of the picture after asking Frye to accept a compromise that would leave the building at 166 feet.

Waring approached Frye last week, well after Sanders decided the time for compromise was over and ordered the building taken down to 160 feet. Sanders said Waring acted without his knowledge or approval.

At a news conference Monday, Frye sounded skeptical about who knew what when. She said the public has a right to know “whose idea this was and who actually knew about it, because it seems very odd that somebody is just acting independently and without someone else's knowledge.”

In an interview, Francis asked comparable questions about why Waring approached Frye after Sanders demanded the building come down 20 feet.

“Either city management is totally out of control or Jerry Sanders knew what he was doing,” Francis said. “Either explanation is not a good reflection on the mayor because he ultimately, as CEO, is responsible.”

Francis also heavily criticized Jo Anne SawyerKnoll, Sanders' ethics chief, for the report she prepared for the mayor's office on the Sunroad building. He said it “has tremendous flaws, misrepresentations and it smells of a cover-up.” At best, he said, SawyerKnoll demonstrated incompetence.

Francis said Sanders has made San Diego government “more dysfunctional and has raised more doubts in people's minds about the mismanagement of a city that already had a reputation for being grossly

mismanaged.”

Waring's departure leaves Sanders' administration with three major vacancies. His top aide, retired Navy Rear Adm. Ronne Froman, resigned suddenly two months ago, halfway through the three-year tour of duty she had accepted in 2005.

She oversaw the mayor's internal investigation into Sunroad from its start in May until her departure, when SawyerKnoll took over. In mid-June, Froman said she had told Sanders before he put her in charge of the probe that she was leaving at the end of June.

City Auditor John Torell left in January not long after the mayor's staff edited one of his reports to say that San Diego's widely castigated financial controls “have improved” so the city can balance its books appropriately. Torell's report initially said the controls “are minimally adequate” for that.

Reached on vacation in Hawaii this week, Sanders said the Sunroad situation had not spun out of his control, but acknowledged feeling like “it was behind me a couple of times ago.”

Strategists say much of the damage appears to be self-inflicted. They suggest Sanders' first mistake was handling Sunroad's pleas for help, including a request that came at a private meeting between Sanders and Sunroad owner Aaron Feldman four days after Aguirre sued his company to stop building construction, as something other than a typical constituent contact.

“When you come into office with this sense of being Mr. Squeaky Clean, I think this is harmful,” Vicknair said.

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By Dagobarbz on 08/16/2007

"Millionaire businessman."

Okay, guys, here we go again. We're gonna have to vote outside of the box this time, and 'millionaire businessmen' might lead to business as usual. Like ex-police chiefs and judges, millionaire businessmen cruise in the waters where deals are made.

Is San Diego willing to give the surf shop chick a chance this time?

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By Robin on 08/16/2007

Jerry Sleaze

Truth has a nice ring to it . . .

Good bye Jerry Sleaze , , ,

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By Charles1966 on 08/16/2007

Start packing your bags Jerry, you're going where all ex-mayors of San Diego go...out to pasture.

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By bajadog on 08/16/2007

We need more Mayors with ties to developers.....

Ya baby!

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By scotsman619 on 08/16/2007

Nobody who is not "anointed" by the big downtown money, CCDC and developers has a chance of being elected.

Democracy in San Diego is an illusion. Any breakout change in votes for mayor can be fixed by the registrar's office during counting. The votes can be declared invalid.

Donna already won once.

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By Gary in Sandy Eggo on 08/16/2007

Whereas I voted for Donna Frye, I am SO glad (for her sake) that she didn't prevail for the third time in a row. For one thing, it would have meant having to go through yet another election until the voters got it right (U-T approved insider fat-cat), and had she been seated she would have NEVER survived the continuing U-T assault reserved for true San Diego watchdogs.

I'm surprised Aguirre has survived this long. Hang in there buddy. Keep throwing those grenades. Civic corruption as deep and all-encompassing as San Diego's will take a LONG time to correct.

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