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West Valley View

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A freeway runs through it

Election data shows political divide in Avondale

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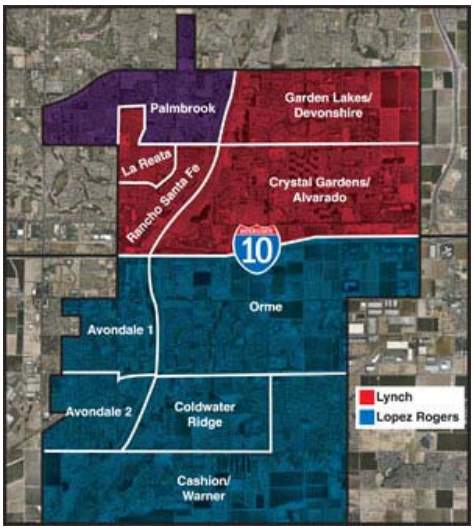

It's used by thousands of motorists a day to commute across the West Valley, but Interstate 10 may play a larger role in local affairs than a traffic headache.

Many Avondale residents have said the federal highway splits their city in two - the north and the south - not only geographically, but socially and politically, as well.

The results of Avondale's Sept. 11 mayoral election may support their claims.

Incumbent Mayor Marie Lopez Rogers beat challenger Councilwoman Betty Lynch by 128 votes in the low-turnout election.

But data from the Maricopa County Elections Department reveals some interesting trends.

Lopez Rogers, who lives in the Avondale 1 precinct south of I-10, won all five precincts in the southern half of the city.

Meanwhile, Lynch, who lives in the Rancho Santa Fe precinct north of I-10, won four of the five precincts in the northern part of Avondale. She lost the Palmbrook precinct, which borders Litchfield Park, by three votes, or 1 percent.

Additional numbers show that Democrats outnumber Republicans in south Avondale: 3,978 to 1,964. Meanwhile, the reverse is true in north Avondale, where Republicans outnumber Democrats: 4,481 to 4,152.

Lynch, herself, is a registered Republican; Lopez Rogers is a registered Democrat.

Avondale city elections are legally nonpartisan, Deputy City Clerk Carmen Martinez said.

Voter turnout a key

Katherine Douglas, an adjunct professor of political science at Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale, suggested the election results more or less stem from the candidates' abilities to appeal to different voter populations.

"It seems to me [Lopez Rogers] mobilized her constituents more so than her competition," Douglas said. "I think what you've got is a mayor with a decade's worth of governance under her belt, and she's basically a lifelong resident, so she's got high name recognition, and she had a campaign that simply turned voters out."

Lopez Rogers also received more votes than Lynch from the early mail-in ballots, which is "a highly salient part of contemporary campaigning in Arizona," Douglas said.

The college educator also had an explanation for the low turnout in the mayoral election, for which only 2,300 of Avondale's 21,000 residents voted.

"When elections are held in non-presidential campaign years - and this wasn't even a midterm election - then the races show pretty low visibility, in general," she said.

"In a low turnout race, such as this, every vote counts, and that's what it takes: phone calls, knocking on doors and all sorts of personal contact," Douglas said. "In local races, that's really what makes the difference: a very energetic campaign organization that effectively mobilizes the voters around Election Day."

A higher voter turnout could have changed the outcome of the race, Lopez Rogers said, calling the lackluster voter participation "horrible" and "sad."

Other factors

Some Avondalians have previously expressed a racial and ethnic divide in their city, observing that more white residents live north of I-10, while more Hispanics live south of the freeway.

Lopez Rogers, who's Hispanic, said she hopes race and ethnic divisions didn't play a role in the outcome of the election.

"That's not why I'm in office. I'm in the office to serve all of Avondale," she said. "My message was clear across both the north and south. I think I had the same message: It was on the growth of both sides, and certainly, not leaving old Avondale behind, but moving it forward."

The mayor also questioned whether or not residents' observations about a racial/ethnic divide were accurate.

"Our demographics have changed so much over the years, I'm not sure that's the case anymore," she said.

Lynch said she believes she could have received more votes in the south had more residents been registered to vote.

"When I collected signatures south of I-10 in many of our new developments, I was told by a number of people that they're still California residents, so they couldn't sign my petition," she said. "[Others] said they are either non-voters or they have friends that are illegal aliens and cannot vote. So, basically, that means you have the original homeowners of south Avondale who are the ones coming out to vote for the most part."

Since Lopez Rogers grew up in Old Town Avondale, she has an edge there, Lynch said.

The outgoing councilwoman couldn't say whether or not race or ethnicity played a role in the election, but noted, "I know I got Hispanic vote in the south, and I have gotten it over the years in previous elections."

For the most part, there is no divide between north and south Avondale, Lynch said. "I have lots of friends south of I-10 and they're registered voters, but it's whether they go out to vote or not."

Still, it's important to create a cohesive city, Lopez Rogers said. "We do that by different community events, different gatherings that include all residents, and I think that's why the Civic Center is where it is: We hold a lot of meetings there."

The mayor blames the proverbial socio-political split in Avondale on the I-10 itself.

"That's why we're concerned about the 801 freeway: It has the potential to do the same," she said.

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