

Candidates set sights on Solis seat

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By Rebecca Kimitch, Staff Writer

With Hilda Solis finally confirmed as Labor Secretary, the race to replace her as the 32nd District's representative in Congress moved into full gear this weekend.

State Board of Equalization head Judy Chu, state Sen. Gil Cedillo, and Emanuel Pleitez - a financial analyst who worked on President Barack Obama's transition team - are all Democratic contenders.

Republican Theresa Hernandez is also making a run to represent the largely Democratic district. The last time a Republican made a bid for the seat was in 2002, when Emma Fischbeck garnered 28 percent of the vote, to Solis' 69 percent.

Although the candidates are quick to boost their appeal among all voters, one analyst says race could be a deciding factor. Chu is Chinese-American, and Cedillo and Pleitez are Latino.

"The question is, can an Asian-American be elected in a district that is demographically Latino? What else separates them? It's not ideology. Both are liberal, both are hard-working lawmakers," said political analyst Allan Hoffenblum.

Most analysts believe the race will be between Chu and Cedillo. Although he's not expected to win, the 26-year-old political newcomer Pleitez could take Latino votes away from Chu, Hoffenblum said.

The 32nd District is 62 percent Hispanic, 18 percent Asian and 15 percent white. It comprises about 640,000 residents in the cities of Azusa, Baldwin Park, Covina, Duarte, El Monte, Irwindale, South El Monte, West Covina and portions of Monterey Park and East Los Angeles.

Voters might have a difficult time distinguishing the candidates on the issues - all have cited transportation and job creation as top priorities. Each said getting federal money to improve the freeway exchanges between the 605 and the 10 and the 60 freeways, as well as the extension of the Gold Line, would be major legislative priorities.

"It will be interesting to see how the two candidates separate one over the other, rather than by race," Hoffenblum said. "On paper, Cedillo is in a strong position, but Judy Chu is a strong campaigner."

Cedillo has been endorsed by Latinos representing nearby districts, including Reps. Grace Napolitano, D-Santa Fe Springs; Lucille Roybal-Allard, D-Los Angeles; Linda Sanchez, D-Lakewood; and Xavier Becerra, D-Los Angeles.

Chu's endorsements from San Gabriel Valley congressional representatives is limited to Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena, but she has also been endorsed by myriad local politicians, including Assemblyman Ed Hernandez, D-West Covina, and the city councils of El Monte, West Covina, South El Monte and Baldwin Park.

"My very large number of local elected endorsements reflects the relationship that I have had in the San Gabriel Valley," she said. Chu also boasts support from the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor and the Service Employees International Union.

But Cedillo, who was general manager of the Los Angeles County employees union before becoming an assemblyman and state senator, said endorsements from union leaders don't necessarily mean union members will follow suit.

"I am very confident that the rank-and-file voters of the San Gabriel Valley are going to recognize our record of leadership," Cedillo said, citing examples in which union leadership endorsed one candidate while members gave their votes to another.

The open primary could coincide with the May 19 special election, during which voters will be asked to decide on measures that are part of the recently passed state budget.

If one candidate wins the primary with a majority of votes, he or she would take the seat outright. Otherwise, the top vote-getters from each party would face off in a general election eight weeks later.

Success in special-election races is largely based on grass-roots, get-out-the-vote campaigns, Hoffenblum said. Paid advertising has less of an impact.

"People who vote in special elections get their information from other sources than mailers or ads," he said. "Chu needs to get massive turnout among Asian-Americans and Latinos," he said. "If it's a low-turnout race, (Cedillo) is going in with a decided advantage because of the ethnic makeup, purely because of ethnicity."

How much the labor organizations work on behalf of Chu could make a big difference, Hoffenblum said. Chu also said voters in the San Gabriel Valley have seen her name on the ballot nine times. She represented parts of the San Gabriel Valley from 2001-2006 in the Assembly and was on the Monterey Park City Council and Garvey School Board before that.

Cedillo's 22nd Senate District has some overlap with the 32nd Congressional District. Although Pleitez lacks a long list of endorsements, the El Sereno native says he is well known throughout the San Gabriel Valley from school, sports and participation in various organizations.

He does not have experience in elected office, but Pleitez said his experience working as a financial analyst in the securities division at Goldman Sachs, and working on Obama's transition team in the Treasury Department would give him unique qualifications trying to combat the recession from inside Congress. He also says his youth could work to his advantage.

"There is something to say about electing the youngest member of Congress, the attention that would bring. Senior members would notice," he said. "I would figure out how to leverage that and find the right mentors to learn from."

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