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Race for Water District seat is tight

Campaign for Santa Clara Valley Water District board saw big money and an attack ad in quest for a seat that will address droughts and flooding in coming years

by Sue Dremann / Palo Alto Weekly

The race for Santa Clara Valley Water District board continues to be close. Challenger Gary Kremen is ahead 52.06 percent to Brian Schmidt's 47.95 percent with 83 of 212 precincts reporting.

Schmidt, the incumbent, said earlier in the evening that he's hoping the percent will shift as more returns are counted.

"I'm on pins and needles. It's really close," he said by phone from a campaign gathering.

Kremen likewise said the vote is too early to call.

In a race that no one would have predicted to be so contentious, both candidates have fought hard to have the edge.

"It's been brutal," Kremen said. "I guess I'm an idiot do this. All I wanted was to do something about the drought and about water. I didn't think it would get so personal with all of the campaign finance stuff. I got pummeled.

Kremen, the founder of Match.com and other companies, [outspent](#) Schmidt by 22 to 1 during the race. As of Oct. 18, Kremen spent \$397,993 to Schmidt's \$17,229.

"Oh, well. They say politics is a full-contact sport. I didn't think it applied to me," Kremen said.

Schmidt, the incumbent, said on Monday that he wished the campaign had been more about the issues of flooding, the drought, and global warming rather than what he said the media focused on -- the vast difference in the candidates' campaign spending.

But both candidates have fought hard for the seat, which represents the cities of Palo Alto, Mountain View, Los Altos and Los Gatos. They traded accusations of conflicts of interest, claims of a failure to act decisively on the drought (made by Kremen against Schmidt), and claims of misleading statements and excessive water use (made by Schmidt against Kremen).

But they agreed that drought, clean water, conservation, climate change and flooding are the major challenges the winner will face.

Schmidt, an environmental attorney who has served on the board since 2010 and is its current vice president, has represented the district on flooding issues at the San Francisquito Creek Joint Powers Authority and is on the district's Water Conservation Ad Hoc Committee, which drafted the district's response to the drought.

A Mountain View resident, he has spent 15 years working on environmental and clean-water issues. During his term, the board succeeded in getting Measure B passed with 74 percent voter approval. The parcel tax is estimated to bring in \$548 million by 2028 for flood control, seismic retrofitting for the Anderson Dam and environmental improvements.

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The district will use some funding, combined with other sources, to contribute about \$28 million toward the San Francisquito Creek flood-reduction project. Measure B funds will also go toward levee replacement and repair and wetland restoration in Shoreline Park in Mountain View.

The creek project hit a major snag when Regional Water Quality Control Board staff rejected a permit to move the project forward. Schmidt met with the staff in August to try to break the logjam but was unsuccessful. Kremen criticized the water district's handling of the problem, saying he would use political pressure to force the regional board to move the project forward.

But Schmidt received a pre-election gift of sorts on Oct. 31, when the regional board ruled the project is on the verge of receiving a permit. The project would then need approval from federal regulatory agencies.

Schmidt was also instrumental in drafting a water-district plan to deal with the drought.

"I led a change before the drought that increased conservation rebates. I later wrote the memo that doubled many of our water-conservation rebates, which quintupled the response for lawn replacement. We're vastly expanding recycled water, and I'm advocating treatment of wastewater to drinkable levels -- a new, drought-proof water supply," he said.

That support drew a nasty, \$30,500 attack ad by the Neighborhood Empowerment Coalition, a "local power" advocacy group. The mailer accused Schmidt of trying to get people to "drink toilet water."

Schmidt posted a response on [YouTube](#), in which he claims that Kremen also supports potable reuse, though not publicly, according to the Mountain View Voice. Potable reuse is already in practice on the International Space Station, he said.

During Schmidt's term, the board approved a countywide, water-use reduction target of 20 percent of 2013 water usage, and Schmidt supported two years of water storage, which he said puts the district in a good position.

Kremen would focus on additional stormwater capture with groundwater percolation, regional recycling and reuse, recharging groundwater basins and desalination, he said.

As board president of the Purissima Hills Water District in Los Altos Hills, he said his experience as a Silicon Valley entrepreneur would be an asset to the board.

If elected, he would take on a California State Water Project tax he says is unfair to Palo Alto, Mountain View and Los Altos residents, who receive most of their water from the Hetch Hetchy water system through the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission and not through the state.

Kremen said he would work to get more conservation funds for districts that use Hetch Hetchy or remove the tax entirely from Hetch Hetchy districts. The water district could get increased water-recycling money and use it to put in gray-water systems in homes, and it could receive water-conservation dollars to extend some of the recycled water across Foothill Expressway into areas of Palo Alto and Los Altos Hills, he said.

Kremen thinks that building coalitions on a regional level will be key to getting things accomplished, and the water district should be using its clout, he said. He pointed to the drawn-out process to get a permit for the San Francisquito Creek flood-control project.

"The water district is the one with some good money. They have discretionary money, and they have their own lobbyist in Sacramento. They touch a lot of people in politics more than other people do," he said.

Kremen is also critical of the water district's approach to the drought. Despite 2012's Measure B funding, the district hasn't started upgrading the Anderson and Calero dams.

"In the event it rains, we can't even store all the rainwater because the water district has not fixed its dams" for seismic safety, he said, as it is required to do by the state Division of Safety of Dams. The district cannot keep the water higher than 20 feet below the dam crest until the repairs are made, he added.

He added that he would also focus on eliminating fiscal waste and abuse within the district, especially holding board members and the CEO accountable.

Schmidt said he has tried to make the board more transparent since his 2010 election. He made the motion to change board meetings from mornings to evenings so that more of the public could attend. He also supported cutting the board's pay, reversing a 2008 pay increase. The pay cut passed on the second vote, 4-3.

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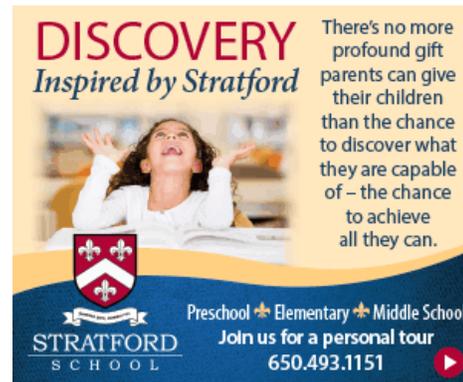
Money buys elections. What a shame to lose a professional like Brian Schmidt to money and smear tactics.

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