

Young decisively defeats Stevens in council runoff

Ex-Lewis aide says he'll be a thinker, innovator

By Kristen Green
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Residents of San Diego's 4th District voiced a clear preference for their current leadership yesterday, choosing Tony Young over former Councilman George Stevens to fill the empty City Council seat.

Young, who drew nearly 60 percent of the vote, will take over for his best friend, Charles Lewis, who died unexpectedly in August. For two years, Young, 38, has worked at City Hall as Lewis' chief of staff, and he promised voters he would continue the work Lewis started two years ago.

"We've won something today," he told supporters last night. "We did something together."

Stevens' supporters had considered his re-election a sure bet. Stevens had served the district for 11 years before term limits forced him to leave the council.

Young received 6,911 votes to Stevens' 4,719, with 19 percent of registered voters casting ballots. About 750 provisional ballots have not been counted, but they are not enough to change the outcome.

Young, who was backed by six council members, promised he would be a thoughtful, innovative councilman during trying times at City Hall. A soft-spoken former teacher, Young went door to door for weeks, talking with voters about his plans for the district. Yesterday, he and his wife, Jacque, stood in the rain for hours waving to residents from major intersections in the district.

The image he portrayed was in sharp contrast to that of Stevens, who worked to cement his reputation as a fighter.

Young has said he has been running the district office since Lewis' death and is familiar with issues facing the city. He is likely to be sworn in on Tuesday at the next City Council meeting.

Young has said he supports voter intent in the November mayoral election, and believes voters intended to elect Councilwoman Donna Frye as their next mayor.

Young said Stevens made mistakes as councilman, citing Stevens' support for underfunding the pension system; the Deferred Retirement Option Program, which gives large lump sums to high-ranking city officials upon retirement; and the Chargers' ticket guarantee. Stevens took the blame for the Chargers ticket guarantee, but pointed the finger at others for his vote on the pension fund.



SEAN M. HAFEEY / Union-Tribune
Tony Young (left) addressed supporters, who included Forney Johnson (foreground), gathered at Tabasco's restaurant last night. Young was chief of staff for the late Councilman Charles Lewis.

Last night, a crowd of more than 100 gathered at a restaurant on Imperial Avenue to celebrate Young's victory.

Greg Akili, a community activist for 28 years, said he wasn't surprised by Young's showing.

"People will always respect George. He has done a lot for this community, but George's time has come," Akili said. "I think people are ready for a change, for a new kind of thinking and a new generation of leadership."

Stevens, who said he was relaxing at his office at Euclid Avenue and Federal Boulevard as the results came in last night, said he was content with the outcome.

"Praise God, I'm fine," he said.

Jerry Butkiewicz, head of the San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Council, which backed Young, said Stevens' inability to land the endorsement of any council members said something important.

"George can go down and scream at the council, but he can't count on getting their votes," Butkiewicz said.

Young also won the endorsement of the San Diego Municipal Employees Association, San Diego Police Officers Association and San Diego firefighters.

He also had the endorsement and support of Lewis' family, and they were thrilled about the victory.

"This is just a labor of love," said Lewis' sister, Charos Lewis-Maull. "It's all coming forth. Our entire family is just overwhelmed."

Young has said he is proud that he ran a clean campaign. During the campaign, Stevens, who concluded that he was called by God to serve the district for a fourth term, said he was praying for Young and that he would be willing to give up his chance at the council seat for Young's salvation.

Young sought to portray himself as a progressive candidate who could take the district in a new direction. He said he shared Lewis' vision for the future of the 4th District.

During the campaign, he worked to introduce himself to voters, noting that he has lived in the district since he was 5 years old. He grew up in Valencia Park and lives a few blocks from his childhood home.

He attended Howard University on a baseball scholarship, but an injury during his senior year helped him decide that his future would be in something other than baseball. He returned to San Diego to work in the community.

Stevens, who represented the 4th District from 1991 to 2002, came out on top in the November special election, with 34.2 percent to Young's 23 percent. Neither candidate had enough votes to win outright among the eight contenders, and a special runoff election was scheduled for yesterday.

Stevens' candidacy was a battle from the beginning. He faced many roadblocks, including a lawsuit challenging the legality of his candidacy and an opinion from the City Attorney's Office that suggested he was ineligible. The city clerk, however, decided to put Stevens' name on the ballot.

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Kristen Green: (619) 542-4576; kristen.green@uniontrib.com

■Staff writer Ronald W. Powell contributed to this report.

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