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Critics say Lakewood mayor too old

ROB TUCKER; The News Tribune

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They say she is too old and has served too long.

Three Lakewood City Council members have widened a political battle by coming out against Mayor Claudia Thomas as she campaigns for re-election.

Council members John Arbeen, Pad Finnigan and Ron Cronk wrote an open letter endorsing Lisa Ikeda, Thomas' opponent.

The letter says Ikeda's younger age group isn't represented on the council, where the average age is around 60.

"It is important that the council reflect the energy and vision of the 'younger' set in the city," the letter says. "Lisa's opponent has already served 12 years on the council, and that is long enough for anyone."

Ikeda is 36. Thomas is 76 and has served on the council since the city was born in 1995.

"I'm disappointed," Thomas said. "Incumbents don't often go against other incumbents," she said, because it's harder to work with them if they win.

"But it's better to have it up front so I know what I'm dealing with."

She said the age-based endorsement of her opponent could backfire because Lakewood has many elderly residents who vote.

Ikeda said she appreciated the endorsement, noting that about 29 percent of Lakewood's population is 25 to 44 years old.

"We're not represented on the council," she said. "A lot of people are tired of the old regimen."

She said she favors setting council term limits at two consecutive four-year terms.

AGE DISCRIMINATION?

Councilwoman Helen McGovern, who defeated Ikeda in 2005, didn't like the reference to age in the endorsement letter.

"Is it socially acceptable now to discriminate on the basis of age? No."

McGovern also said there's a strange contradiction in the councilmen's action: A year ago they all voted to name Thomas as mayor.

Arbeen, who is deputy mayor and 61 years old, said he respects Thomas as "the grandmother of Lakewood." However, he said, she's not serving city interests if she "carries a chip on her shoulder" and feels like the Council Position 6 seat belongs to her.

Finnigan, who is 64, said he can't recall a major policy issue where he and the mayor split. He also supported Thomas for mayor. But he said Ikeda is more conservative and shares more of his political values.

SPENDING AN ISSUE

For instance, Finnigan said, he zeros in on city finances and spending, while Thomas seems more enthusiastic about

spending city funds on Lakewood youth and other human services issues.

Cronk, who is 65, didn't return calls for comment.

All three councilmen are members of Lakewood CARES, a political group that was critical of the council majority and backed candidates in some Lakewood elections during the past five years.

Ikeda said she's friends with council members who signed the letter but isn't a member of CARES.

The group is not as active now. Arbeeney said this endorsement was made by the three individual council members, not CARES.

Arbeeney is serving his first four-year term. He chose not to run for re-election this year. Finnigan is in the middle of his second term, and Cronk his first.

RACE FOR COUNCIL, NOT MAYOR

The endorsement letter, which has been circulated by mail and e-mail for more than a week, also emphasized that the Thomas-Ikeda election contest is for a council seat, not for the mayor's position.

The mayor is mainly a ceremonial post; a city manager administers day-to-day operations of the city. The seven-member council appoints a mayor and deputy mayor every two years and will do so in January, when Thomas could be picked for a second term. She served four terms as deputy mayor.

Ikeda runs a restaurant business in Ponders and lives there. She once helped persuade the council to fund new street lights along Pacific Highway Southwest in Ponders.

CANDIDATE WANTS CURFEW

If elected, she said she would push community policing and propose a citywide curfew on people under 18, similar to Tacoma's, to protect youngsters and help reduce crime.

Thomas said she wants to continue her one-year program to help develop neighborhood leadership to fight crime. She said she also will try to protect a council policy of allocating 1 percent of general fund revenues annually for human services.

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