

LA WEEKLY

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An Appealing Shade of Green

Denise Munro Robb for City Council

Big John Ferraro ruled the 4th City Council District for 35 years, from 1966 until his death in April, the longest council reign in L.A. history. Term limits will hold his successor to eight years at most. But that's not the only change afoot. Today, Ferraro might not win in the 4th District, which has undergone a transformation in the last three decades. It's now mostly renters, and it's left-leaning compared to Ferraro, an affable USC football hero who was an insider's insider, with a careerlong affinity for the downtown business and development elite. Voters in this diverse swath of L.A. have an opportunity, come September 11, to choose a successor who is considerably more progressive. And a progressive swing here could help define the City Council for the better in a way that the mixed and mixed-up results of this year's city elections did not.

In this spirit, the *Weekly* endorses Denise Munro Robb, a resourceful, committed activist who successfully spearheaded a yearslong fight to halt the destruction of historic apartment buildings, many of which offer decent affordable housing, in her Wilshire-area neighborhood. She's also been active in the Green Party and local environmental causes — as a candidate, she's earned the Sierra Club's highest possible rating. She was practically weaned on antinuclear protests, and would push hard to get as much open space as possible in the Ballona Wetlands on the Westside and in Taylor Yards downtown. Like most residents of the 4th, Robb herself is a renter, and she's attuned to the issues of renters, including the pressing and long-overlooked need to crack down on slumlords while also building more affordable housing.

Tellingly, she was rebuffed the first time she pigeonholed Ferraro years ago over these matters. "Tenants don't vote," she recalled him saying. Robb, who left her job as a paralegal at the Immigration Law Center to make this run, offers a more inclusive political calculus. "Even if people aren't citizens, they deserve to have a voice," she told the *Weekly*. "I want to be that voice."

The hitch is that the 39-year-old Robb has little chance of winning. Conventional wisdom dooms her candidacy, in large measure because her campaign embodies the very attributes that make her appealing, including her refusing to accept donations from developers and lobbyists. She's going to raise about \$25,000 in a race where the top spenders could blow half a million. So while urging voters to support her, we also have to note distinctions between the moneyed candidates. Among these, the *Weekly* clearly prefers former state Senate President David Roberti, a talented, accomplished legislator.

The center of District 4 is Griffith Park, the city's largest green space. The district's voters reside in offshoots from this focal point — to the northwest, a slice of the San Fernando Valley; to the south and east, Los Feliz and part of Silver Lake; and to the south and west, portions of Hollywood, Koreatown, the Wilshire district and the Fairfax/Farmers Market area.

Large sections of the flats are filled with left-leaning minorities and renters, many of whom can't or don't vote. Other parts, such as Studio City and Hancock Park, are more centrist and more likely to vote. The hillsides include pockets of prosperous homeowners, who also are higher-propensity voters. But many of them, despite their prosperity, are easily to the left of Ferraro. In this summer's race for mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, the darling of L.A. progressives, carried the 4th, even though he lost the city as a whole to middle-of-the-road Democrat Jim Hahn. A lower turnout is expected in the special election, which would result in a somewhat more conservative electorate. ä



Denise Munro Robb:
Voice for the powerless
Photos by Ted Soqui



David Roberti:
Ready to stick it to landlords



Philosophically, Robb is reminiscent of council newcomer Eric Garcetti and the departed Jackie Goldberg, though she can't match Goldberg's experience and accomplishment or Garcetti's intellectual tour de force. Former state Senate leader David Roberti is likely to run stronger in the primary, in part because he'll raise ~~perhaps 10 times as much money~~ — \$300,000 by his estimate. But even that war chest — and his solid record — doesn't make Roberti a clear favorite. Two candidates who could fare as well or better are former Ferraro field deputy Tom LaBonge and Los Angeles Community College trustee Beth Garfield, though neither is as committed to progressive solutions on issues that will or ought to come before the council.

LaBonge, 47, is a rarity in L.A. politics, a candidate favored by entrenched business interests as well as a handful of nameplate progressives. He expects to raise about \$300,000, most of it from the usual suspects, the same **developers, downtown law firms and Chamber of Commerce types** who made sure that Ferraro was never seriously threatened. If you judge a man by whom he works for, then keep in mind that LeBonge, a registered Democrat, spent the last quarter-century of his city career as field deputy for good-old-boy Ferraro or moderate republican Mayor Richard Riordan. He nonetheless rates a thumbs-up from ~~Riordan antagonist~~ **David Abel**, a local publisher.

"There is no better candidate to ensure that the neighborhoods that make up the 4th will have a champion for livability than Tom," said Abel. "What he knows about each street corner, let alone neighborhoods, what he knows about ~~the city employees who do the heavy lifting that makes the city livable, is unmatched by anyone I know.~~"

If you tell LaBonge, a lifelong area resident, where you live in the 4th, he'll know if your street needs paving. If it does, he'll promise to take care of it. "If I didn't know him," said respected L.A. River activist Lewis MacAdams, "~~I probably wouldn't support him.~~" What won him over is a series of neighborhood deeds small and large. MacAdams recalls when river **activists couldn't get the city bureaucracy** even to acknowledge the L.A. River. The Public Works Commission ignored their entreaties to **install signs that identified the river on bridges over the stream.** "I finally complained to Tom," recalled MacAdams. "So he took a fifth ~~off his own dime to the guys who work in the shop where they make signs, and within a week they'd painted signs that said 'Los Angeles River.'~~ **Then he took another fifth off his own dime to the guys whose job it is to put up the signs. And within a week, all the bridges over the river had signs identifying the L.A. River.**"

No one, of course, really objects to signs that say 'L.A. River.' The deeper question is what happens when LaBonge's real love of green space and riverbanks — he hikes every day in Griffith Park and used to wade in the L.A. River **as a child** — clashes with the desires of developers who contributed mightily to his campaign. "There is some suspiciousness in the **preservation community and in neighborhood organizations** that he is perhaps too tied to development groups," said one leader of the city's historic-preservation movement, who asked not to be named.

One thing is certain. If LaBonge wins, the city will have its very own George W., when it comes to the spoken word. Take, for example, this transcribed treatise from his interview with the *Weekly* editorial board on goings-on at the L.A. Zoo: "Good things are happening at the zoo, and some people don't like zoos, and there's a group that doesn't like zoos, except there's some who do. **But they're bringing the zoo out to the parking lot.** They've redone the road, instead of doing it L.A. direct straight through, **they've got it more friendly, and they're bringing the animals out.** Now I don't think we're going to become zoos around the world. ~~Because some of the old zoos — I know the zoo in Berlin is right in the center of Berlin, and they have two big capped elephants that are wonderful gateway to connect you to the zoo.~~ That zoo is going to expand in there. I don't think there is room for additional zoo, with the **exception of whatever they would propose, if they propose something on the existing parking lot.**"

If you think pinning LaBonge down on the zoo is difficult, try the living wage, or the proposed expansion of the city's meager affordable-housing trust fund, or the future of Police Chief Bernard Parks. Ask him about proposals to **allow freeway billboards — keep in mind that billboard companies are huge campaign contributors — and LaBonge quickly segues into a discussion of how annoying he finds Caltrans electronic message boards to be.** For all the folksiness, LaBonge is no fool, and he's running like a ~~front-runner who doesn't want to say anything that could come back to haunt him or the interests that support him.~~

Community college trustee Beth Garfield, 49, is relying on a very different constituency and a determination to outspend all her opponents. Like LaBonge, she's attracted substantial contributors, relying in part on the Westside financial power base of her husband, former state Assemblyman Wally Knox, who was a staunch and effective advocate for labor issues in Sacramento. In addition, Garfield, who hails from a wealthy family, is prepared to spend \$350,000 of her own money. And she also has the backing of the L.A. County Federation of Labor, the region's most potent army of political foot soldiers. Garfield earned this support through her work as a well-regarded labor attorney. Garfield has protected hotel workers from sexual harassment and defended the right of city workers to picket the harbor. Garfield's also been endorsed by the area's congressman, Henry Waxman, and by Antonio Villaraigosa.



Beth Garfield:
High marks from labor

At a recent Garfield fund-raiser, Miguel Contreras, the head of the County Fed, revved the

crowd by first noting the multitude of different unions whose members were on hand. If any of you, he implored, belong to a union that was not helped by Beth Garfield, raise your hand. Not one hand rose, according to one union leader in attendance.



For the last eight years, Garfield's served on the elected board of the Los Angeles Community College District, which oversees nine community colleges. She's earned good marks from her board colleagues and the college presidents ~~in serving an institution~~ whose overall progress is difficult to gauge because it gets virtually no meaningful scrutiny from the press or ~~any other outside entity~~. "She's got a very incisive mind," said fellow trustee Kelly Candaele. "There's a lot of times on the board when ~~we were facing some difficult problems~~ and Beth was generally a person who has come up with creative solutions. In terms of style, I think ~~that she would be more aggressive and active in the community~~" than Ferraro.

Garfield could make a fine City Council member, based on her qualifications and accomplishments. In this campaign, however, she is running to the right of Robb — that's not a shocker — but she's also definably to the right of **David Roberti**. Think warmed-over Dianne Feinstein — including a pro-death-penalty stance — although, unlike Feinstein, that position is not an element of Garfield's campaign. Some of her positions on issues before the city are simply unimpressive. She endorses, for example, ~~the insane notion~~ — **pushed by the police union** — of a police workweek consisting of three 12-hour days. It sounds like she's playing for the police union's endorsement in the event that its first choice, LaBonge, fails to make the runoff. And while Garfield finds considerable fault with Police Chief Bernard Parks, she won't take the perceived political risk of saying that Parks doesn't deserve another five-year term.

On funding affordable housing to the tune of \$100 million per year, Garfield makes no promises: "I think it was very much a campaign theme [in the mayor's race], and Hahn picked this \$100 million, and it's a nice round figure, but ~~until we find where it's coming from~~, it means very little." On the notion of making developers pay fees to support a housing fund, she ~~sounds more like the Chamber of Commerce~~ candidate than labor's stalwart: "My only concern about linkage fees is I don't want ~~to basically tax developers~~ so that they don't develop in Los Angeles, because we need new development."

Nor does Garfield support a broad extension of the living wage beyond city regulations that require it of city contractors and city-subsidized businesses: "If you're talking about requiring a tenant [in a city-subsidized development] **to pay a living wage**, I would have some problems." This position puts Garfield at apparent odds with living-wage activists, who ~~are might now negotiating with city leaders~~ and private developers to craft exactly the sort of expansion of the living wage that makes Garfield uncomfortable.

Moreover, three weeks before the election, after numerous campaign forums, Garfield had no particular ideas about campaign-finance reform or how to enhance renters' rights during an interview with the *Weekly's* editorial board.

There's a better choice among the main players, and that's former state Senate leader Roberti. For many progressives, the knock against the 61-year-old Roberti, who is Catholic, has always been his opposition to abortion rights. And ~~that might be reason enough to keep him off~~ the California Supreme Court, but abortion rights are not within the purview of council duties, **and Roberti says he has no intention** of trying to change that. Garfield has flooded the district with mailers asserting that "We can't trust ~~Roberti to continue city-funded family-planning services~~" and "We can't trust David Roberti to ensure safe clinic access in Los Angeles." Roberti counters that **he would not go** after funding for clinics or hamper access to them. And even if he wanted to, his one vote on the 15-member council **wouldn't do the deed**. Besides which, health care is essentially a county, not a city, function. There is no city health department.

On the plus side, tenant activists adore Roberti, who has all sorts of ideas for helping renters, including reducing the size of annual rent increases. "I think laws are skewed [against renters], especially in Los Angeles, almost to the ~~point of tenants being mompersoms~~ . . . I will give attention to a long-ignored constituency: the renters, who should be the muscle of the 4th **District rather than a forgotten part**."

Landlords certainly think he's for real; the apartment owners association has mounted a campaign against Roberti. His endorsements include Tom Hayden and a Assemblyman Gil Cedillo.

Roberti also has ideas about recycling and trash management that come from his current service on the state's waste-management board. For starters, he would include apartments in the city recycling program: "You have a ready ~~constituency to participate~~, **as opposed to the days of Sam Yorty**, when people didn't want to segregate the trash. The culture has changed."

Until done in by term limits, Roberti was a real power during a 20-plus-year career in Sacramento. In the fight to ban assault weapons, he was willing to put his career on the line: After Roberti pushed through gun-control legislation, **the National Rifle Association** trained its full arsenal on Roberti and mounted a nearly successful recall campaign against him. He is our choice over Garfield.

Robb, of course, looks even better. Like Garfield, Roberti hedges on the future of Police Chief Parks. Not Robb: "I think he's got to go. Community-based policing was destroyed by Parks." And Robb would push harder on expanding ~~the living wage and campaign-finance reform~~. She'd be equally as strong as Roberti on tenants' rights. Being a Green would not hamper **Robb** if she were elected to the nonpartisan council. In fact, the local level is precisely where the Green Party can most readily have a positive influence.

Ten candidates will be on the ballot in all. Other aspirants include Linda Lockwood, a 59-year-old builder, designer and community volunteer; Susan Fong, a 50-year-old adult-education teacher who has been active in historic preservation and as a commissioner on the county homeless-services authority; 53-year-old Richard MacMinn, who says he sold his software company to become more active in politics — he's anti-development and anti-secession. For comic relief, there's 50-year-old tax preparer and perennial candidate Melrose Larry Green, who insists he's been to more City Council meetings than all the other candidates combined, and there's Michael Schaefer, a 63-year-old disbarred attorney, who's run unsuccessfully for many offices in many places, perpetually reminding folks that somehow, decades ago, he persuaded the San Diego citizenry to elect him to their City Council.

Ferris Wehbe, 43, an effective and hard-working Hollywood community leader, will likely get strong support in the Hollywood environs from people who know of his labors to expel gangs from neighborhoods and to develop after-school programs. He and his wife operate the Hollywood Little Red School House, a private school on Highland Avenue. From our standpoint, it's a reach to endorse a candidate who led the Hollywood secession movement before this campaign, especially when there are strong alternatives.

Our choice faces long odds on winning, but we don't believe that an endorsement of Robb — or a vote for Robb — is wasted, because if the *Weekly* doesn't support solid local candidates who work for causes we support, who will? And if we don't support them now, then when would we?