ELECTION 2014

Rebecca Garcia seeks to restore trust and unite Watsonville

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WATSONVILLE » Rebecca Garcia thinks Watsonville needs a change in leadership — and she doesn’t think she’s alone.

In June, she said, when voters approved a package of municipal government reforms, they were expressing their displeasure with the City Council.

Though Garcia opposed Measures H, I and J for “technical reasons,” she said she understood the motivation of backers and applauded their effort.

“They said ‘We don’t trust you. We don’t believe in you, and you’re not listening to our voices,’” said Garcia, who is challenging incumbent Daniel Dodge for the District 5 seat on the City Council. “I can restore that trust, and reunite the community.”

Garcia, 67, was born and raised in Watsonville, and brought up her children here as well. She has served on numerous city and county committees, and is currently a parks and recreation commissioner.

A retired educator, she was a member of the Cabrillo College board of trustees for 20 years. During her tenure, the college, which once offered classes in four rooms at the La Manzana Center on Main Street, took over a former post office and constructed additional buildings to create a downtown campus.

As a trustee, Garcia said, she acquired skills that will make her an asset on the council.

“I learned to focus, to negotiate and I learned to compromise. You need to do all that. You need to listen to those who don’t think like you,” Garcia said.

Unfortunately, Garcia said, her rival has not shown similar abilities. From the start of her campaign last December, she’s been critical of Dodge, a former friend and ally, saying he falls short when it comes to communication and collaboration. Garcia pointed to his push to annex farmland outside the city as an example.

“He led the council to have a special election (on the annexation proposal) that cost the city $60,000 and lost 75 percent to 25 percent,” she said.

Garcia said a better idea — and one that Dodge supports as well — would be to try to remove restrictions on retail development at the Manabe-Ow property near Highway 1 and West Beach Street.

She’s also concerned about a proposal for Watsonville to take over Highway 152 from Caltrans. Dodge supports the concept as a way to create a downtown more attractive to businesses and residents. Garcia wants to know how the city would pay to maintain the road and how traffic would be affected.

“If elected, Garcia said she’d make working with the Pajaro Valley School District a top priority. The former Rolling Hills Middle School principal said Watsonville needs a better educated work force to thrive, and city officials should see what they can do to support schools.

Garcia also wants to see the city work on ways to attract tech jobs, and she thinks more can be done to stress ecotourism opportunities. The city is surrounded by agriculture, known as a birding center and has miles of wetlands trails.

“We don’t market that,” she said. “We do have the Strawberry Festival. That’s a strategy we need more of.”

Public safety also is at the top of her agenda. She said a recently approved sales tax hike that is enabling the police department to hire more officers and update equipment will help. But the community needs to do its part, she said. She supports neighborhood watch groups, and want to see them work closely with police and the city’s Neighborhood Services Division.

“I believe public safety starts at the community level,” she said. “I live in a neighborhood with a strong neighborhood watch. We come together not only to watch out for each other and prevent crime, but we’ve become neighbors who care about each other.”