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Johnson attracts big names in Sacramento mayor's race

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Kevin Johnson took the stage of a packed Oak Park theater last week and accepted an endorsement from Jack O'Connell, California's public schools chief and one of the state's most visible elected officials.

Next month, Johnson – who already has spent more on his bid to become Sacramento mayor than anyone in city history – appears at a fundraiser here with Michael Bloomberg, New York's billionaire mayor.

Johnson's campaign promises a longer list of celebrities and political players backing the former NBA All-Star.

With big names and big dollars, town hall-style meetings and vast media exposure, Johnson's campaign is taking on a national profile unfamiliar to Sacramento politics.

But will the fanfare yield votes in November?

That's not entirely the point, Johnson said.

"If I can take advantage of my relationships and the celebrity that I have and the networking I've done to benefit Sacramento, I'm going to do that," said Johnson, who this week is attending the Democratic National Convention in Denver. "Sacramento is no longer a cow town, and I don't want anybody to imagine us or see us that way."

On the other side of the Nov. 4 ballot is Mayor Heather Fargo, running for an unprecedented third term. While Johnson's celebrity largely comes from his basketball days, Fargo has earned her own name recognition from a long political career in Sacramento. She's also endorsed by more than three dozen local elected officials.

And though she's been outspent by a 3-1 margin in this campaign, Fargo has won under those conditions before: She defeated Rob Kerth in the 2000 mayoral election despite spending nearly \$500,000 less than her opponent.

Still, Johnson's celebrity and campaign style present a new challenge, political experts said.

"She's going against a well-financed candidate with pretty substantial name ID and lots of celebrity and high-profile buddies," said Gary Dietrich, a local political analyst and president of Citizen Voice, a voter-awareness organization. "This is a race that has transcended Sacramento boundaries."

Fargo's campaign will remain local. And so far, her aides appear unconcerned about the fundraising gap.

"When it's all said and done, this race is in Sacramento," said Dale Howard, Fargo's campaign manager. "We haven't run into anyone who said if Michael Bloomberg is for him, I'll support him. I don't think that's how people think."

Even Johnson's campaign acknowledges that bringing in people like Bloomberg probably means little for the final vote tally, agreeing that support in Sacramento means more.

However, the Bloomberg appearance, scheduled for a Sept. 14 fundraiser at the home of developer Angelo K. Tsakopoulos, is a sign Johnson is willing "to bring big people in and steal ideas" on city management, said Steve Maviglio, Johnson's campaign manager.

"It may seem unconventional, but when you're running against a 20-year politician with a Rolodex full of names, it can be hard for an outsider," Maviglio said. "Kevin has his own hefty Rolodex, and he might as well use it."

That Rolodex – at least as it relates to the mayoral campaign – got a bump last week with O'Connell's endorsement.

The announcement came at the first of eight town halls Johnson has scheduled over the next two months. During the forum, Johnson, founder of the nonprofit charter school organization St. HOPE, described his "moral imperative" to eradicate inequality in the education system and laid out his education platform.

Asked if he'd ever backed a candidate in a local election, O'Connell said, "not very often, but Kevin is a personal friend whose work in education I've admired."

The backing from O'Connell, a Democrat mentioned as a potential gubernatorial candidate, "helps funders take you seriously and helps with serious Democratic voters," Dietrich said.

As for big names from outside the state and region?

"(Sacramento) has become a big city in its own right," Dietrich said. "So the fact these people are paying attention to what's happening in Sacramento adds some cachet."

The money doesn't hurt, either, Dietrich said.

According to the latest election filings, Johnson has spent nearly \$1.3 million on his campaign. Maviglio said half the money will be spent on door-to-door canvassing.

Johnson and Fargo also must contend with a packed ballot dominated by the presidential race and 12 state propositions.

"To break through that ain't easy, especially at the local level," Dietrich said. "In a quieter year you may be able to get people's attention a lot easier and cheaper."

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