

Mayoral race about more than one issue

Beyond the question of tolling, candidates differ on range of core attitudes

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The gloves have been off for weeks in the Vancouver mayor's race. And two weeks before Election Day, no one's sure of the outcome of this cliffhanger.

At 70, Mayor Royce Pollard is fighting the political battle of his life against City Councilman Tim Leavitt, a man slightly over half his age who makes no secret of his ambition to nudge Pollard off center stage.

The billboards and lawn signs all over the city, and the ads that began airing on cable TV last week, make the race impossible to ignore.

Already, the 2009 mayoral campaign is the most expensive in the city's history. Pollard has raised more than \$120,000, and a labor political action committee has added \$51,500 for TV ads. Leavitt has raised \$84,000, and another labor PAC has contributed more than \$35,000 to his effort.

The contrast couldn't be sharper: the rumpled, blunt-speaking mayor who has become the face of Vancouver over 14 years versus the smart, calculating young challenger who is pulling out all the stops in a campaign based as much on Pollard's personal style as on specific issues — with one exception:

Leavitt's opposition to tolling a new Interstate 5 bridge is the linchpin of his campaign, and the issue that has the race on the political radar of the entire region.

Leavitt says tolling Clark County commuters who use the bridge to get to work would be punitive. However, he hasn't offered any detailed alternative for raising a \$1.3 billion local contribution to the \$4.2 billion project.

And when pressed, he says he wouldn't try to block the project if tolls are part of the package, because that would be "obstructionist."

Pollard calls Leavitt's position "disingenuous at best." Shortly after Leavitt edged him by 43 votes in the August primary, the mayor warned that electing Leavitt would kill plans to replace the bridge.

Tolls will be a piece of the funding package or the bridge won't be built, Pollard says, and officials from Gov. Chris Gregoire to U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, who wields considerable influence on federal transportation funding, agree.

"It is a user fee," Pollard says. "My goal is to make it as low as possible. Mr. Leavitt should be working to get as much money as possible from the state and federal governments."

Leavitt says the problem is that once the decision to toll is made, the city will have no control over how high the tolls will be.

"My point is, tolling our citizens that work in Oregon is flat-out unfair," he said.

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Pollard takes pride in the changes he's helped bring about during his 14 years as mayor: a remade Esther Short Park, a new hotel-convention center, downtown condos and businesses, parks and recreation centers across the city. He also boasts of less-visible contributions, such as the wooing of SEH America's Japanese parent company to increase its Clark County workforce and his recent lobbying trip to Washington, D.C., which produced a federal commitment to pay for 10 more city police officers.

He wants four more years — no more — in part to help see through a couple of projects that will transform downtown: a new bridge over the Columbia River and an ambitious riverfront redevelopment project on the site of a long-gone lumber mill.

Leavitt, a city councilman for seven years, says it's time for fresh vision. He accuses Pollard of failing to listen to the business community and ordinary citizens when they bring their ideas to City Hall.

He's proven himself an effective fundraiser and has won key endorsements from the Vancouver Police Officers' Guild, county Realtors and the building industry.

But aside from the tolling issue, he has struggled to differentiate himself from Pollard on key issues facing the city.

Pollard, for his part, has run a largely defensive campaign. He's clearly irritated by Leavitt's jabs and has wondered aloud at candidate forums why, as far as he can recall, his opponent never criticized his record until he decided to run for mayor.

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The mayor and his supporters, along with much of the city, were taken by surprise when Leavitt finished first in the Aug. 18 primary, winning 42.4 percent of the vote and edging Pollard by 43 votes. A third candidate, Charlie Stemper, received 15.1 percent of the vote and endorsed Leavitt the following week.

Leavitt says he speaks for the business community because he's part of it. He co-founded the Vancouver office of PBS Environmental Engineering in 2000 and serves as its director of engineering services. The company has handled wetland mitigation and other environmental issues on major projects including the Burnt Bridge Creek Trail and the Clark County Public Safety Complex near the county fairgrounds.

During the county's building boom, as the regulatory climate became more complicated, PBS grew from 2 to 45 employees. His clients "need our expertise to negotiate the maze," Leavitt said, though the current building slowdown has required him to lay off two employees.

Pollard says Leavitt has the city's favorable business climate to thank for the growth of his company.

Leavitt works full time but says if he were elected mayor, he would curtail his involvement in the company. "I'm fortunate to have a very strong staff. We've worked together almost a decade. They're battle-tested."

Pollard already works more than full time and says he has no intention of slowing down. "I've just had my best physical in 20 years," he said. He declines to say how he'll fill his time if he loses this election, though he says after a final term as mayor, he plans to devote himself to veterans' causes.

"I'm going to be mayor for four more years," he said.

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Leavitt says the idea of taking on the Mayor of America's Vancouver first occurred to him about three years ago, when Pollard raised the possibility of reviving a business and occupation tax the city had phased out earlier to win support for annexing the area around the Vancouver mall.

Business leaders were unhappy, Leavitt said, and came to him with their concerns.

"Every time Royce proposes to raise taxes, businesses come to us and say, 'You know we are trying to compete with IKEA across the river and the Jantzen Beach Shopping Center,'" he said in an interview last week.

Leavitt began meeting weekly with a small group at the Paradise Cafe, across from his Main Street office. He said they encouraged him to run for mayor.

The option of reinstating the B&O tax as a way of solving a city budget deficit was discussed by the entire council, including Leavitt, Pollard said.

"Most of the council was supportive," he said. "Business leaders did get up in arms." In

November 2006, the council dropped the B&O tax idea and instead voted unanimously to levy a \$50 per-employee "head tax" on all city businesses to raise revenue for road construction.

Pollard says Leavitt came to him in 2007 and asked whether he would "mentor" him. "We met for coffee a few times," Pollard said. He said Leavitt told him at the time, "If you don't run for mayor, I'm going to run. But if you do run, I won't."

Soon after, Pollard said, Leavitt reneged on the agreement and began seeking support for a race for mayor.

Leavitt said he expected, based on Pollard's statements at the time of his 2005 election, that the mayor would retire in 2009. He said he hoped he would not have to run against Pollard, whom he considers "a mentor and friend."

When, in the fall of 2007, Leavitt did inform Pollard of his decision to run, the mayor at first seemed unperturbed, Leavitt said in an e-mail. "During the next few months, something seemed to change, and his demeanor toward me became cold and curt."

When he asked about the change, Leavitt recalled, the mayor said he didn't appreciate being told the news, and said that people shouldn't "count him out."

"I regret Mr. Pollard saw my decision to run for mayor as a slight against him. But his insinuation that I somehow 'double-crossed' him are misleading if not thoroughly false," he said.

Pollard admits that Leavitt's decision might have affected his own decision to run "a little."

Was injured pride a factor? "Maybe," Pollard said.

Point-counterpoint

Although their debates have been civil, and Leavitt has often praised Pollard for his contributions to the city, the two do disagree on Pollard's record, as interviews with both revealed last week.

Leavitt says Pollard doesn't understand the needs of the business community because he has no experience "watching the bottom line, detailing expenses, evaluating employees."

Pollard retorts that as commander of the Vancouver Barracks, he oversaw a multi-million-dollar budget. Even as a small-unit commander during his 27-year Army career, "I was responsible for all the equipment in the unit, vehicle maintenance, personnel and discipline," he said. "In Vietnam, I was also responsible for lives."

nLeavitt says the city police department is understaffed and has been for years, but a study that suggested the city could save \$1.6 million every two years by contracting out its parking enforcement, making that money available to hire more police, "fell on deaf ears" at City Hall.

Pollard says any decision to contract out parking enforcement would have run up against serious collective bargaining issues. "We deal with unions. It's very difficult," he says. Besides, he says, the numbers in that study were provided by a company that could have benefited from the arrangement. "In the end," he said, "It didn't pencil out."

nLeavitt takes issue with Pollard's style. He says the mayor is disrespectful to citizens who come before the council and has a "disconnect" with the community.

"People have told me, 'We appreciate that you are willing to listen to us, you give us respect,'" Leavitt said.

Pollard denies that he's disrespectful. "People say I'm arrogant, but I'm aggressive in defense of this city," he said. "People should not confuse my aggressiveness with arrogance. I've been short with some people at City Council who abuse us or our staff. I expect them to treat us as we treat them."

nLeavitt says Pollard overstates his record of attracting jobs to Vancouver, pointing out all the empty downtown storefronts. He says the mayor should spend less time courting SEH America with trips to Japan and more time visiting Fourth Plain Boulevard.

"Vancouver is not an SEH town," he says. "We have local people who are vested and invested in this community."

Pollard claims Vancouver has gained 14,000 new jobs in his 14 years as mayor, a figure his campaign attributed to regional economist Scott Bailey. Pollard says he's visited more than 1,000 businesses to discuss with them how to retain jobs and grow new ones. He's released a blueprint for creating new jobs through expansion of tax incentives, outreach, recruitment and partnerships with private investors.

Both candidates agree that the next four years are going to be pivotal for the city as it struggles to recover from the recession, rebuild its economy and move forward with major projects that will reshape downtown, including a new I-5 bridge and an ambitious waterfront redevelopment project.

"I chose to run for mayor two years ago because of a sense of urgency," Leavitt said at a candidate forum Thursday night. The city, he said, is "ready for a fresh perspective."

"Our citizens are ready to take the city to the next level," he said in an e-mail. "We've come a long way in the past 20 years, but what got us here isn't going to get us where we need to go."

Pollard says there's no substitute for the hard-won experience he brings to the job — experience that he says gives him critical access to state and federal decision-makers who can advance the city's interests.

"You start from scratch in proving yourself and building relationships," he said. "I was on the council seven years (before his election as mayor) and I thought, 'I can do this.' But I was mentally challenged. I really wasn't prepared. People want to talk to the mayor. They want to bounce things off the mayor. Being mayor of the city is a lot more than kissing babies and shaking hands."

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