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El Rancho Unified recall effort leaps first hurdle

by BRADLEY BERMONT

Filing with Los Angeles County officials two days early, volunteers behind the Committee to Recall Jose Lara and Leanne Ibarra 2019 say they have collected enough signatures to hold a recall election against the two El Rancho Unified school board members.

Since launching the effort in July, the group collected 9,760 signatures in support of recalling board President Lara, according to Esther Mejia, a local parent and committee leader. The volunteers gathered 9,680 signatures against Ibarra, she said, which is still above and beyond the 6,509 signatures required by the county to hold a recall election.

Now the recall's fate is in the hands of officials in the Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk's Office, who have 30 days to verify each signature, ensuring each belongs to a registered voter living in the school district's boundaries.

Committee members are confident the signatures will pass muster. It's something they'd been independently tracking, said volunteer Andrew Lara (no relation to the embattled school board president).

Assuming the signatures are validated by the county, typically it would mean a special election held no more than 80 days after the verifying the signatures, according to state law. However, it's unclear when this special election would happen because of the statewide general election in March. Recall elections are allowed to be combined with a general election if the latter occurs within 180 days of signature validation.

While Ibarra did not respond to a request for comment, Lara said he looks forward to speaking with voters directly "to dispel the misinformation" the recall campaign has spread.

"Our community will have to decide if they want to continue with the rebuild of El Rancho (High) or let all that money go to waste. They will have a choice of continuing a progressive vision for our schools," he said by text message, touting other accomplishments in office, such as increasing mental health services for students, as well as future plans for student achievement and class-size reductions.

Or, the community can "allow the old political establishment back in," he said.

If the recall does make it to the ballot, that would mean "a one-day, two-step process," said Josh Spivak, senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College and author of the Recall Election Blog.

There would be four questions voters would answer on Election Day: A yes-no vote on whether to keep Lara, and another for Ibarra. If enough votes are cast to remove either from office, residents also will choose the replacement.

While anyone can run, the committee will eventually name two replacement candidates for the school board seats, according to California School Employees Association President Tony Hernandez, who was one of the committee's leaders.

Mejia, who was previously a member of the district's Citizen Bond Oversight Committee and has been involved heavily in school district affairs for years now, will likely be one of the candidates, Hernandez said. It's still undecided who the second person would be.

'It was a slog'

Lilia Carreon, president of the El Rancho Federation of Teachers, said the effort got off to a sluggish start, but hit a turning point in August. That's when she started to believe they had the stamina to cross the finish line.

"Even though it was the beginning of the school year, many of our teachers were walking when they should be getting ready," she said. Dozens of teachers from across the district were walking alongside more than 50 alumni and 30 district retirees and countless community members, she said. "I realized their dedication was going to help us get to our goal."

Andrew Lara was among the volunteers who gathered signatures from the onset. For three hours almost every day, he walked alongside Durfee Elementary School teacher Christina De La Cruz, a Pico Rivera native, collecting signatures in occasional triple-digit summer heat.

They would average two and three blocks most days, De La Cruz said. At first, residents hadn't heard about any of the controversies around the school board — from the rehiring of construction company HPLE, to the principals who were reassigned or fired, to the state's financial audit over suspected bond mismanagement.

Later in the process, De La Cruz said she would tell residents about the campaign donations made by HPLE and Presidio Communications before they both received district contracts. That was the walkers' simple pitch, De La Cruz said. She'd close the conversation, saying: "I've seen corruption in Pico Rivera, but never to this extent."

That would seal the deal: "They would always sign," De La Cruz said, adding she could count the number of rejections on both hands.

For De La Cruz, who was sometimes walking five, six or seven days a week, "this was personal," she said.

"I know (the school board) would be coming after us if this didn't happen," she said, referring to allegations included in a state's Public Employment Relation Board filing which says the district is in the midst of a union-busting campaign.

Still, organizers know that it's just the beginning. After the signatures are validated — assuming there are enough to make the ballot — they'll have more hurdles to clear.

“This just gets us into the dance,” Andrew Lara said. “We haven't won anything. This just sets up the election. Now it's actually campaigning” to convince voters to replace Lara and Ibarra on election day.

A community-driven effort

“I'm excited, but I hesitate until the county actually validates the signatures,” Hernandez said. “I'm not ready to celebrate.”

To get to this point, he added, the group spent “well under \$7,000.”

That's a big contrast with the initial estimate of \$150,000 from county officials, he said.

Without any real financial support, getting more than 9,000 signatures was a “significant accomplishment,” Spivak said. “It's unusual for a recall of that size to get on the ballot most of the time. Usually they don't go anywhere.”

According to Ballotpedia, which tracks recall efforts across the country, only 30% of school board recalls landed on the ballot between 2009 and 2018. Many of these are smaller, Spivak said.

In a district that's as big as El Rancho Unified, the hardest part is getting on the ballot. Once it's there, Spivak said, “a little more than half” end with the incumbent getting the boot.