

Herhold: Local political races generate some ugly hits

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With a couple of exceptions, they are punching above the belt if they punch at all. For journalism's sake, I wish it were otherwise. But in the end, maybe it's for the best that this year's local primary has been a relatively tame and polite affair.

With a runoff certain in a hotly contested San Jose council race and possible in at least one supervisorial race, most of the brass knuckles have been put away. Everyone expects a low turnout Tuesday.

While something could change before Election Day, we're left for now to savor what we can. What follows is my judgment of whether the punches hurled toward various candidates are underhanded.

A proviso: Just because something is negative doesn't mean it's unfair. I don't embrace pacifism in campaigning. But to attacks that are truly nasty, I'll give from one to four garbage cans (see the pieces at www.mercurynews.com/scottherhold).

A) The chamber of commerce's hits on Craig Mann. Let's face it: Mann, one of the field in the District 8 council race, has baggage. While on the East Side Union School board, he ran up more than \$30,000 on district credit cards, eventually repaying \$1,100 for personal expenses and conceding a "mistake."

The chamber's three mailers hit him hard on this, repeating the theme, "Can San Jose afford Craig Mann?" One piece included pictures of his expenses, including a dinner for 18 at the Salt Rock Grill during a Florida conference. (A lobster attractively perched on a plate).

Verdict: One-half garbage can. The chamber's pieces were accurate, though they skipped a nuance here and there. The dinner, for example, was for East Side employees.

B) Richard Hobbs' attack on George Shirakawa Jr. The underdog in the race for the District 2 supervisorial seat in central San Jose, county human relations exec Richard Hobbs put out a piece that was - well - unfair. That's saying

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something: Like Mann, Shirakawa has baggage, primarily in his record as a lobbyist and East Side Union High School District board member.

Hobbs' nastiest tactic was using a truly awful picture of Shirakawa - one that showed his jowls in profile, his eyelids half-closed, his weight apparent. Hobbs' own picture had a straight-on professional look.

The piece also distorted a Shirakawa statement to the Mercury News, saying Shirakawa's top priority was to sell county assets. In fact, that was only one

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issue Shirakawa mentioned. He also cited crime, youth and trails. Verdict: Two garbage cans.

C) The BAREC people's critique of Dominic Caserta. At a Web site called Not Caserta (www.notcaserta.org), the forces behind the losing effort to preserve the former BAREC agricultural site in Santa Clara have done an exhaustive critique of the Santa Clara councilman, who is running for the Democratic nomination in Assembly District 22 against educator Paul Fong and two others.

The anti-Caserta people have unearthed evidence of Caserta's switcheroo on the BAREC vote (he eventually voted for development), \$14,000 in campaign contributions from SummerHill homes and an ugly profanity he uttered during a council meeting in March. (To hear this, go to www.youtube.com and type in "Caserta and profanity").

Verdict: No garbage cans, though the site has cheesy moments.

D) Frank Chavez's assault on Shirakawa: A piece from the Republican Chavez, the Alum Rock school board president, shows an unnamed bald man - think money, cuff-links, pinstripes - scowling at the camera with the words, "Do You Want A Supervisor in the Pocket of Special Interests?" A smaller Shirakawa is next to him with thumbs up. The piece points out Shirakawa's record as a lobbyist who raised thousands of dollars from contractors for his school board race. (Full disclosure: It quotes me criticizing Shirakawa.)

It's basically accurate. Verdict: One-half garbage can.

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