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12TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Candidates clash over job labels on ballot

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Candidates in the 12th Assembly District aren't calling each other names. But a dispute has arisen over what they call themselves.

Ken Vogel persuaded a judge to strike the word "farmer" from Heath Flora's description of himself on official printed ballots, an order that Flora "emphatically disagree(s)" with. The ruling leaves Vogel as the only candidate among five in the June 7 primary race with the "farmer" status label under his name.

Vogel and Flora are Republicans, as is candidate Cindy Marks, although party affiliation is ignored when ballots are counted; the top two vote-getters, regardless of party, advance to the November ballot. The ultimate winner will succeed Kristin Olsen, who is running for a Stanislaus County supervisor seat.

Meanwhile, Virginia Madueño's Assembly campaign, knowing that Democratic contender Harinder Grewal of Keyes recently left the Turlock school board, questioned Grewal's claim that he is a school trustee. Madueño backtracked upon learning that Grewal joined the Keyes Union School Board about the same time he left Turlock's, in December.

"I'm not offended," Grewal said. "If you don't know, it's good to ask questions."

Flora, however, is mighty offended at Vogel's attack. Vogel's campaign hired a Corona attorney who enlisted Riverbank resident Barbara Seay as the plaintiff in an "immediate action required" lawsuit in Sacramento County, where the California secretary of state's office is located.

"Heath Flora sells farm equipment to farmers. He does not grow crops or otherwise operate a farm," the lawsuit said.

The first part is true, Flora

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told The Modesto Bee, but he insisted the second is not.

"I've always been a farmer," Flora said. "I am a farmer today, I will be when I'm in the Legislature and I don't need a judge in Sacramento or an attorney in Southern California to tell me otherwise."

Flora's grandparents began farming in the Wood Colony area west of Modesto in the 1950s, he said. The family later established orchard-management and nut-harvesting companies for which he manages sales, and he and his family grow 8 acres of 3-year-old almond trees whose best income-producing years are yet to come, he said.

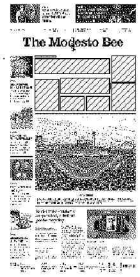
"This was a political move thrown by another political camp, and it's unfortunate," said Flora, who moved to Ripon – from Assemblyman Adam Gray's district into Olsen's – a year ago. The 12th Assembly District covers eastern Stanislaus and San Joaquin counties and includes Turlock, Salida, Ripon, Manteca, Lathrop and part of Modesto.

Todd Filbrun, a Manteca solar businessman, said he's known Flora "his entire life" and worked for the family business 20 years ago harvesting nuts in Bakersfield. Flora has farmed "since childhood," Filbrun said.

Vogel, a Stockton resident, did not directly respond to requests for comment. His campaign consultant, Scott Winn, said, "Most of Ken's supporters are farmers. Many people in the farming community were concerned that (Flora) was misrepresenting himself and brought it to our attention."

Vogel raises more than 100 acres of walnuts and cherries near Farmington and Linden, some marketed by a Hughson company. The description of his occupation – elections officials call it a ballot designation – is "farmer/independent businessman." He was a school principal in Lodi before retiring in 2004, and previously served as a school board trustee in Linden and as a San Joaquin County supervisor before terming out in 2014.

Because of Sacramento



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Superior Court Judge Shelleyanne Chang's April 1 ruling, Flora's ballot designation will be "firefighter/businessman." He previously worked for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and is a volunteer battalion chief with the Woodland Avenue Fire District west of Modesto.

Marks' ballot designation reads "school board trustee." She lives in Modesto and has been a Modesto City Schools board member since 1997.

Madueño, who owns a public relations firm called Imagen and formerly was mayor of Riverbank, chose "small business owner" for her ballot designation. Challenging Grewal's "teacher/school trustee" description was her campaign consultant's idea, and neither was aware of Grewal's service on the Keyes board, she said.

Grewal, an agricultural inspector with Stanislaus County, also teaches agricultural economics at California State University, Stanislaus in Turlock.

"All of us should debate based on issues, not our candidate designations," Grewal said. "Our views on the topics, that's what matters."

The California Elections Code says ballot designations of no more than three words must describe "current principal professions, vocations or occupations" and can't "mislead the voter" or include valuations such as "outstanding, leading, expert, virtuous or eminent."

Bee columnist Jeff Jardine poked fun in 2014 at both U.S. Rep. Jeff Denham, a Republican, and Democratic contender Michael Eggman for "trying to out-local farmer each other." Denham owns a 20-acre orchard he bought after winning a state Senate seat and moving to Atwater in 2002, but his family lives in Virginia, while Eggman farms and keeps bees near Turlock but lives in Kingsburg, Jardine noted.

The two are opposing each other again this year, with descriptions "almond farmer/beekeeper" for Eggman and "businessman/farmer/representative" for Denham. Also running for Denham's U.S. District 10 seat are Republican "farmer" Robert Hodges and Democratic "lawyer/CPA/programmer" Mike Barkley.

June candidates with interesting ballot designations include "social entrepreneur" Scott Vineberg and "stay-at-home dad/attorney" Mike Beitiks, both independents among 34 candidates running to succeed Barbara Boxer in the U.S. Senate.

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Cindy Marks



Harinder Grewal



Heath Flora



Ken Vogel



Virginia Madueño

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