

Occupation on ballot makes a difference with voters

Updated April 2, 12:05pm: Assemblywoman Beth Gaines may call herself a small business owner on the ballot per Sacramento Superior Court Judge Michael P. Kenny's ruling today.

By Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee

What are the most high-stakes, second-guessed, agonized-over words since "I do?"

For California politicians, it's the three-word description that voters will read in the polling booth before making up their minds.

"It's valuable real estate in a campaign," said Paul Mitchell, a Democratic strategist.

Tension over ballot titles played out last week in Sacramento when lawsuits were filed challenging the designations of Assemblywoman Beth Gaines, R-Rocklin, and San Joaquin County congressional candidate Jose Hernandez, a Democrat.

Hernandez, who rode in the shuttle Discovery three years ago, won use of "astronaut/scientist/engineer." Although Hernandez left NASA in January 2011, a judge said it was not misleading to voters.

Gaines' use of "small business owner" will be decided today. Her opponent thinks it doesn't reflect the state lawmaker's primary occupation.

The stakes are high. In a fast-paced society where not all Californians are familiar with political candidates, voters may side with the person whose occupation impresses them most – or offends them least.

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