

2 Republicans seek to represent Tahoe in state Assembly

By Dana M. Nichols, Stockton Record

SAN ANDREAS – Non-Republicans may cast the deciding votes in the 5th Assembly District in November, even though Republicans have by far the largest registration numbers in the district and a Republican is certain to win.

That's because two Republicans – Rico Oller of San Andreas and Frank Bigelow of Madera County – are on the ballot.

In the June primary, Oller had 33.9 percent of the vote and Bigelow had 29.9 percent. That primary, decided by California's new top-two rule, sent the top finishers on to November regardless of party.

Those registered Democrat and no party preference combined make up just more than half of registered voters in the district, which means the eventual winner will likely need at least some of their votes.

Yet Oller, 54, and Bigelow, 58, are campaigning as conservatives who say they favor small government and believe that cutting taxes and easing regulation on businesses is the way to spur economic growth.

As a result, nonpolicy questions have become a significant focus in the campaign, with Oller portraying Bigelow as a lukewarm conservative prone to changing his views and Bigelow portraying Oller as a career politician.

"They don't want people that have already served in the Legislature," Bigelow said of why he thinks voters will choose him over Oller.

Oller formerly served two terms in the Assembly and one in the state Senate. Bigelow is a Madera County supervisor.

Both men also own businesses. Bigelow comes from a ranching family that also owns Ponderosa Telephone Company. Oller has a building materials supply company in San Andreas.

Oller criticizes Bigelow for waffling on high-speed rail. Although Bigelow now says he opposes the plan, he voted for it in years past on the Madera County Board of Supervisors.

"I am the same person I have been all through the race and I am not going to change," Oller said. "Frank, on the other hand, is much more morally flexible and is willing to change his positions depending on the circumstances."

Bigelow said his views on high-speed rail changed because more recent reports exposed problems with the viability of such a system.

Bigelow says he, too, is a solid conservative.

"I think I am a strong person who has a conservative ideology," Bigelow said.

Bigelow has raised significantly more campaign donations than Oller, much of it from political action committees tied to corporations and Sacramento lobbying groups. His donors include the California Dental PAC, the California Real Estate PAC, the California Professional Firefighters PAC and the United Indian Auburn Community, which is the tribe that owns the Thunder Valley Casino in Lincoln.

Bigelow's perspective on why these donors give to him: "Maybe because people want me elected."

Oller's perspective: Bigelow is tied to Sacramento special interests.

Oller, too, has donations that indicate the interests he

supports. Organizations that have given him money in the past few months include the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association and the National Rifle Association.

The 5th Senate District includes all or part of seven counties on both slopes of the Sierra Nevada south of Lake Tahoe. It also includes a few Valley areas around Madera.