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DA runoff in November: Carr and Sinunu

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Superior Court Judge Dolores Carr and Chief Assistant District Attorney Karyn Sinunu are headed toward a runoff election to decide which of the two would become Santa Clara County's first female district attorney.

With most precincts reporting, Carr had opened a substantial lead over Sinunu in the four-person race, but was short of the majority of votes needed to win outright. That would mean a November runoff election to succeed District Attorney George Kennedy, who is retiring after four terms.

Carr is a former prosecutor who was elected to the bench six years ago; Sinunu is a current prosecutor who rose to become one of the most powerful members of the district attorney's office.

The general election could bring a sharper choice for voters. In the primary election, the four mostly unknown contenders focused on promoting themselves and generally refrained from challenging each other. That could change with only two candidates.

"The voters will have a very clear comparison," said Sinunu, which she predicted would work in her favor. "It's a whole new ballgame."

"I think it is a brand new race," Carr agreed, "but we're going to be consistent in our message -- that it's time for a change, and that I have the qualifications and the independent perspective that the community" needs.

Carr heads into the runoff as the front-runner -- a significant turnabout since the race began.

Sinunu, 58, jumped into the race in early 2005 and for months was considered the candidate to beat. A longtime senior adviser to Kennedy, she had insisted for years that she had no interest in succeeding him but changed her mind at Kennedy's urging.

Sinunu used her institutional advantage to gain a head start in fundraising and endorsements.

But the dynamics shifted in a span of a few months last year. In August, Carr, 52, decided to give up her seat on the bench to run for district attorney. Bolstered by strong support from police unions and a weighty job title, Carr immediately was seen as a formidable challenger.

Soon after, Deputy District Attorney Jim Shore entered the fray. With longtime community ties and an active five-year stint as head of the county attorneys union under his belt, Shore, 46, also had the political muscle to be a factor.

A fourth contender, Assistant District Attorney Marc Buller, 48, had deep experience as a prosecutor and manager, but lacked the political network needed for a countywide campaign.

Although the candidates remained positive, Sinunu still became something of a lightning rod. In a seemingly major setback, Kennedy publicly hedged his endorsement of Sinunu in May. To what degree Kennedy will back Sinunu in the general election campaign is an open question. The popular four-term district attorney is Sinunu's most prominent supporter, and losing his support entirely would be damaging.

Meanwhile, other former high-ranking members of the office who had worked with Sinunu came out against her, criticizing what they called an abrasive management style. And Sinunu was also put on the defensive by a series of often vicious anonymous letters attacking her.

Sinunu tried to shift the focus to her biography -- starting in the district attorney's office in the mid-'80s as a working mom and low-level clerk and rising to become Kennedy's top assistant. She touted her efforts to reform police lineup procedures, a frequent cause of wrongful convictions. And she reminded voters of her work to free wrongfully convicted defendants who were prosecuted by members of her own staff.

Carr went largely unscathed by comparison. Early in the campaign, she faced questions in the Mercury News about a Stanford doctor she prosecuted for rape in the early 1990s who was later shown to be innocent. And Sinunu suggested that Carr would not be independent from law enforcement because her husband is a longtime police officer.

But those issues never gained much traction, and Carr gained momentum. Despite entering the race relatively late, she raised more money than her opponents -- and benefited from a \$51,430 independent expenditure by a political committee called the Public Safety Alliance. She racked up a long list of endorsements, from police unions to some prominent defense attorneys. And she campaigned on a platform of reforming what she called a "win-at-all-costs" attitude within the district attorney's office.

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