

EAST BAY TIMES

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Editorial: Martinez badly needs a new generation of leaders

Voters should select Brianne Zorn for mayor, Jay Howard for council in District 1 and Ben Therriault in District 4



Brianne Zorn is running for Martinez Mayor in 2022. (Photo courtesy of Brianne Zorn)

Martinez has had just two mayors in the last 38 years. Three of the five current City Council members have served at least two decades.

It's time for change. The city needs fresh leaders, not a recycling of the old guard.

For mayor in the Nov. 8 election, voters should select Brianne Zorn, a councilwoman elected two years ago who has brought badly needed fresh perspective. And for two City Council seats on the ballot, the best candidates are Jay Howard in District 1 and Ben Therriault in District 4.

Interviewing Martinez candidates this year provides a sense of déjà vu. They talk about reenergizing and cleaning up downtown, developing the marina and improving morale in City Hall. It's the same issues and, unfortunately, many of the same candidates. They haven't gotten the job done.

They haven't even comprehensively updated the city's general plan since 1973. That might finally happen in the next couple of weeks because the city must update the housing portion to comply with state requirements. But the nearly half century since the last general plan rewrite further exemplifies why Martinez needs new leaders.

District election debacle

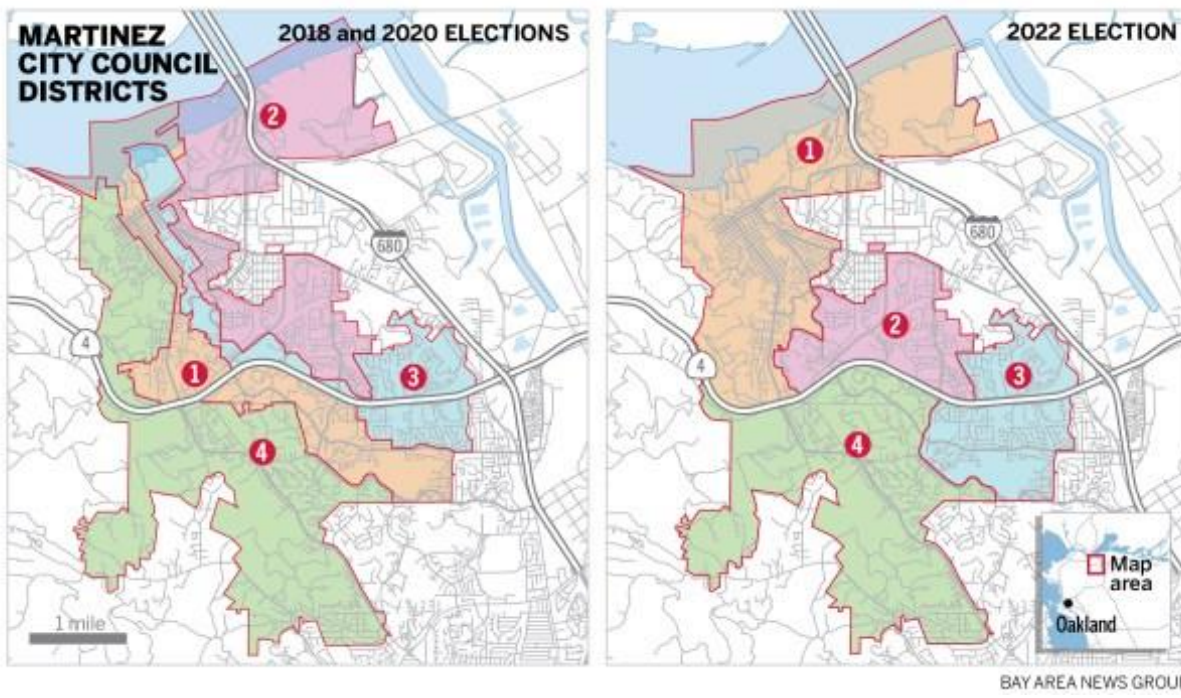
Sadly, those with the greatest longevity are trying to cling to power. We see it this year in the mayoral race — and we saw it when the city converted from citywide at-large council elections to selection by district.

In 2017, [an attorney threatened to sue](#) the city because he said its at-large council elections did not comply with the California Voting Rights Act, which aims to ensure fair representation of minority communities.

Council members responded with a self-serving gerrymander to protect their political futures. The resulting snaking boundaries that crossed the city diagonally, used in the 2018 and 2020 elections, gave each of the four districts a piece of downtown and were designed so no incumbents would have to run against each other.

As public outrage grew, the all-White council was forced to approve an independent redistricting commission, which after the 2020 census drew logical and compact districts that are being used for the first time in this election.

The new map shakes up the geographic political center. Two of the new districts are predominantly south of Highway 4, giving voice to nearly half the city that has been short-changed for far too long. And the new map is forcing long-overdue turnover that presents opportunity for council diversity in a city that's 37% people of color.



The original Martinez City Council district map, left, approved by the council and used in the 2018 and 2020 elections, gave each of the four districts a piece of downtown and was designed so that no incumbents would have to run against each other. The new map, right, drawn by an independent redistricting commission, will be used for the first time for the Nov. 8 election.

Mayor – Brianne Zorn

Bob Schroder has finally decided to step down after 26 years on the City Council, including the last 20 as mayor.

Zorn is hands down the best person to replace him. A botanist and environmental scientist, she's smart, articulate, well-informed on city issues and exceptionally communicative with her constituents.

She wants to restore trust in city government while better supporting its undersized staff. When she ran for City Council two years ago, she pressed for the independent redistricting commission and was a driving force in making it happen after she was elected. Zorn has led the charge for change. She would be the mayor the city needs.

Three of the six mayoral candidates are part of the two-decade club — leaders who have had their chance and should move on. Mark Ross has served on the council for 26 years, Lara DeLaney's tenure has lasted 20 years, and Mike Menesini was mayor for 18 years before Schroder and then served on the council for eight more before voters finally booted him.

Menesini is especially problematic. Like a wad of chewing gum stuck to your shoe, he seems impossible to get rid of. No matter how many times voters say no, he keeps trying to hang on.

He lost bids for county supervisor in 1992 and 2016, Superior Court judge in 1994, district attorney in 2002, and Contra Costa Community College board member in 2018. And, in 2017, he applied unsuccessfully for district attorney when the county Board of Supervisors filled a vacancy.

But Menesini kept getting elected in Martinez — until 2014, when city voters wised up to his self-absorbed behavior. His ouster followed his discussions about becoming city manager, for which he was unqualified, in a move that would have [spiked his pension](#).

Menesini placed his own interest ahead of the city's. Residents put up with him for 26 years; they don't need him back.

As for the other two mayoral candidates, Michael Ayers did not return our calls. And Sean Trambley, a member of the city Planning Commission since 2017 who ran unsuccessfully for county supervisor in 2020, lacks Zorn's council experience. Moreover, his aggressive style contrasts sharply with Zorn's calm and measured approach that makes her temperamentally the best candidate. If Trambley had instead run for City Council in District 1, he would have been the best candidate there.

District 1 – Jay Howard

This is the district that includes downtown, the one that every mayoral candidate except for Ayers lives in. As they rushed for the top post, it left a vacuum in District 1 that two weak candidates have filled.

Howard, a member of the board of the Northern California Carpenters Unions, has some understanding of the city's issues, which gives him the edge in this race, but he is too quick to call for city-worker raises without understanding the budgetary implications.



His opponent, Nekenya Allen, is a veterinary technician, a member of the county's Community Advisory Board and a racial justice activist who successfully pushed the city to form its anti-discrimination task force. But beyond that, she lacks foundational understanding of city issues.

District 4 – Ben Therriault

This race features two candidates from law enforcement. Therriault, [whom we supported](#) in his unsuccessful campaign earlier this year to unseat Contra Costa County's problematic sheriff, is a Richmond cop and president of the Richmond Police Officers Association who brings forward-thinking policies to policing. Debbie McKillop, interim chief of the sheriff's forensic crime lab, is seeking her third term on the council.



Both candidates have solid understandings of city issues. A key difference is that McKillop was a proponent of the horrible first set of council district boundaries used in the 2018 and 2020 election that carved up downtown and protected incumbents. In contrast, Therriault supports the 2022 map and the independent commission that drew it. He understands the political benefit for residents of District 4, a region south of Highway 4 that historically has been overshadowed by council focus on downtown issues.

Voters who want change should back Therriault.