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Published Sunday, Jan. 20, 2002, in the San Jose Mercury News

Assembly race endorsement battle heats up

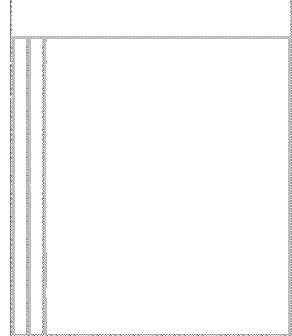
Santa Clara City Council member **Rod Diridon Jr.** and Mountain View Mayor **Sally Lieber** are wrangling for every possible advantage in the close race for Assembly District 22, encompassing much of the southern Peninsula. Their battle for the endorsement of the influential Democratic Forum of Silicon Valley, a group of 100 pro-business Democrats, is shaping up as one of the more intriguing subplots in the race.

The forum's nod not only boosts a candidate's moderate credentials but also brings a potentially huge bounty -- as much as \$75,000 in the District 22 contest. That would be nearly one-fifth of the maximum \$400,000 Assembly candidates are allowed to raise.

But what makes this endorsement fight more interesting than others is that both candidates are forum members -- Lieber joined three years ago and Diridon last year. Forum rules would force the loser of the endorsement to pony up money to the winner -- thus appearing on his or her opponent's contribution list. Imagine the campaign flier that would make.

As the forum's members prepare to vote Jan. 30, Diridon and Lieber are aggressively working the phones. Diridon has the advantage going in.

The forum's executive board -- led by Santa Clara County Assessor **Larry Stone**, a co-chairman of Diridon's campaign -- voted recently to endorse Diridon and throw \$75,000 his way



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voted recently to endorse Diridon and throw \$75,000 his way. That would be half of the total that forum members agree to pool and distribute to candidates each election cycle.

Lieber is forging her own coalition -- including forum member and Assemblywoman **Rebecca Cohn** of Campbell, whom the group helped vault into office in 1999 -- to block Diridon's endorsement and persuade members to choose her instead.

Either candidate needs 60 percent of voting members to prevail, and forum sources say it's too close to call. Mountain View council member **Rosemary Stasek** also is running for the Assembly seat but isn't expected to be much of a factor in the forum's endorsement choice.

Lieber predicted that forum members would buck the executive board and endorse her instead.

"I feel great about it," Lieber said. Of Diridon, she added, "I would be proud to have him as one of my contributors."

Said Diridon: "It's a great endorsement, and I'm working hard for it."

Cellular Safety Simitian: Assemblyman **Joe Simitian** thought he had rustled up the last vote needed to move his cell phone bill out of committee last week.

He thought wrong. But he's not giving up.

For the second time since June, the Assembly Transportation Committee gave only nine votes to AB 911, which would have banned drivers from using cell phones unless they use hands-free technology, such as a head set.

Nine members voted for the measure, four against it, and six didn't vote, leaving it one vote shy of the 10 needed to send it to the floor. The additional vote he'd been counting on didn't go his way, and committee member Simitian blamed intense lobbying by the wireless industry.

"In the 12th hour, the industry came forward with an alternative proposal that is a make-believe alternative designed to scuttle a real step forward in terms of public safety," he said.

Lawyers will be lawyers: You have to hand it to lawyers sometimes.

Internal Affairs last month wrote about the lawsuit Deputy District

Attorney **George Chadwick** filed against lawyer **Bill Priest**, both of whom are running for Santa Clara County Superior Court judge. Chadwick was peeved that Priest submitted a ballot statement with endorsements from a previous race. The court ordered Priest to modify the statement.

But the endorsement flap didn't end there.

Priest -- a self-titled ``Superior Court Attorney" -- also listed the 1999 endorsements on his current Web site.

Internal Affairs asked Priest why he kept a Web site with old endorsements, including one from the Mercury News -- even though the paper hadn't yet endorsed a candidate in the current election. Priest said he didn't know his Web site was outdated and the next day he removed the page.

But as of Friday afternoon there was still a link on his Web site, <http://www.priestlaw.com/> that directs viewers to, you guessed it, some of those old endorsements. Could he have forgotten it was there? You be the judge.

Mercury News Staff Writer Chuck Carroll contributed to this report.

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