



Signs of Struggle

José Huizar is riding Villaraigosa's coattails in the city council's 14th District, but Nick Pacheco

By [Bobbi Murray](#)

As the last shimmery days of October blend into early November, the roomy, well-heeled homes on Hill Drive in Eagle Rock burst with the bright orange, yellow, and witchy-green of Halloween. But, it being an election year, those colors clash with campaign signs pitched by 10 candidates running for the 14th District city council seat left vacant by Antonio Villaraigosa when he quit to run for mayor.

Hill Drive is one of those streets where a candidate wants to campaign hard, an upscale neighborhood with a high percentage of likely voters. Now it's festooned with the red, white, and blue signs of Nick Pacheco, the former councilman, locked in a tough race against fellow front-runner José Huizar, president of the Los Angeles Unified School District board.

Pacheco's signs far outnumber everybody else's on Hill Drive - there are several for longtime council staffer Ruby DeVera, and one for Brian Heckmann, the Republican in the race. But there is only one yellow-and-purple Huizar sign evident where Hill curves down toward Colorado.

"I refuse to let him buy any more signs," sighs Parke Skelton, the über-campaign manager who launched Villaraigosa into the political stratosphere and who now runs Huizar's effort. "I hate them," Skelton says. Opponents inevitably take them down, there's a challenge to replace them, it's a big waste of energy, plus they cost three and a half bucks apiece.

And signs don't win campaigns. Huizar may have fewer than Pacheco, but Huizar is the candidate with the hookup. He's been endorsed by Mayor Villaraigosa, the political man of the hour, and a slew of elected officials followed suit - like, almost the entire City Council - along with every important labor local, plus community and environmental groups.

That translates into precinct walkers, who ply the street in determined clumps of twos and threes, consulting voter lists and nailing down supporters. The "yeses" will then be visited and phoned all day long on Tuesday, November 8, until they vote - or until 8 p.m., whichever comes first.

Huizar has also raised more money - \$362,968 to Pacheco's \$156,907. None of the other candidates has come close.

But Pacheco does have name recognition. He was, of course, elected councilman for 14th District and served from 1999 until mid-2003. That's when Villaraigosa ran against him and pounded Pacheco by 17 percentage points.

So Pacheco is now running as a kind of incumbent; his literature says "re-elect" Nick Pacheco. This cuts two ways: good recognition and bad recognition. "People recognize the name," says Robert Urteaga, Pacheco's campaign manager. "They may not like him, but they know him."

Not the kind of endorsement you want from your campaign manager, but it does have the admirable ring of truth. There's no denying Pacheco is laboring under the weight of some baggage in this campaign. There was that business in the mayor's race of 2001, when Pacheco was linked to a sleazy phone hit against Villaraigosa, then running in a mayoral primary against a field of dozens, including Congressman Xavier Becerra.

"Don't hang up! This is an emergency!" said the woman's voice, a canned message speed-dialed to the homes of female Democratic voters. It went on to say the call was on behalf of "Gloria Marina" - which sounds like Molina, the wildly popular eastside pol - and that Villaraigosa, as an assemblyman, had opposed legislation targeting child molesters (which he did, but only to vote later for stronger legislation).

Turns out that some of Pacheco's council staff, on leave to help Becerra's bid against Villaraigosa, were involved in the matter.

The campaign has a play-by-play document available to counter the claims - the district attorney investigation found no indication Pacheco knew the content of the message before it was launched - but the explanations have an unfortunate when-did-you-stop-beating-your-wife? quality. And some of that residue has stuck to Pacheco.

But name recognition does help him, says Jaime Regalado, executive director of the Edmund G. "Pat" Brown Institute of Public Affairs. "Nick Pacheco is a recognized entity, and José has his work cut out for him." Regalado says Huizar needs to make himself more visible. "José has all the endorsements and is going to have three times the money, but unless he hits the streets, this is not an election he wins."

Huizar, in the last week of the run, cites a poll that puts him 10 points ahead of Pacheco, while conceding there are plenty of undecided voters, especially in voter-rich Eagle Rock.

But there's more to the district than that. The 14th also takes in Highland Park and Boyle Heights, both areas with a large multigenerational Mexican-American population, plus a lot of immigrants. The area is still pocked with rundown housing and poverty, and it would require a passionate and savvy politico to attack its lingering problems.

Both front-runners were raised in Boyle Heights, and both have degrees from UC Berkeley. Pacheco, a former deputy district attorney, has a law degree from Loyola Law School; Huizar's is from UCLA. Huizar also earned a master's degree in public affairs and planning from Princeton.

Huizar, as president of the LAUSD, has positioned himself as a kind of Big Picture guy who goes after big policy issues. He championed the move to make college-prep curriculum available in all LAUSD high schools, and has built relationships with such powerful grassroots groups as the south side's Community Coalition to move a progressive education agenda. And he calls his candidacy "part of a broader social justice agenda we're all working on out there."

Not everyone does. The Los Angeles chapter of ACORN, the national organization focused on empowerment for low-income people, met with Huizar, but ultimately didn't endorse him. Members couldn't reach a consensus, a spokesman said. Pacheco didn't get a nod either, but it's somewhat surprising that Huizar didn't easily find common ground with ACORN leaders.

"I don't know what happened," he says. "I would have liked an endorsement from the organization because of what they stand for."

Pacheco, who was unavailable for interview by press time, positions himself as a neighborhood-level pol. "Social change comes from the ground up, and my role as the elected official is to foster the activism necessary to bring about long-lasting change in our neighborhoods," his website statement says. The site also rolls out lists of bread-and-butter accomplishments: closing nuisance alleys, street cleanup, arts-programs support.

"He wasn't a constituent-services guy before - although toward the end he started to pay more attention," says Peter Dreier, professor of politics at Occidental College. Dreier, an affordable-housing advocate, complains that Pacheco, as head of the council housing committee, only reluctantly sponsored the ordinance to expand the city housing trust fund, and then, Dreier says, took a hands-off attitude as advocates campaigned to pass it.

Pacheco and Huizar are almost certain to end up in a runoff; an outright win would require one candidate taking 51 percent. The field of 10 will likely eliminate that possibility.

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