

LOS ANGELES ELECTIONS

2nd District's 'Queen of Potholes,' Greuel Is Unopposed

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Some politicians like to brag about the coveted committee assignments they snagged and the legislative power plays they pulled off. City Councilwoman Wendy Greuel's favorite boast is that she put on work gloves shortly after her election and helped city crews and 100 volunteers to fill 747 potholes in one weekend.

In the 11 months since Greuel was elected to the Los Angeles City Council, the former film-studio executive has earned the nickname "Queen of Potholes" for her willingness to pick up a phone, and even a shovel, to make sure sidewalks and streets are fixed in her district.

Relying heavily on an army of volunteers, the 2nd District councilwoman has overseen the repainting at 30 graffiti sites and the installation of left-turn signals at two dangerous intersections. She has identified 350 abandoned cars for removal and secured budget language to repair nine miles of sidewalks and 22 miles of streets by July 1.

"My focus has been on the needs of my constituents. I have not focused on politics downtown," she said.

Now, less than a year after narrowly winning a special election to complete the term of 30-year Councilman Joel Wachs, Greuel is back knocking on doors in the southeast San Fernando Valley district, pledging to keep the heat on City Hall to improve basic city services.

But this time she's unopposed, a rare situation even for veteran council members.

It appears that Greuel, a 41-year-old Van Nuys resident, has struck a chord with her constituents by focusing on the basics, according to Larry Berg, retired founder of the Unruh Institute of Politics at USC and a veteran City Hall watcher.

"She fits her district very well," Berg said. "She tends to spend quite a bit of time in the district, which people think is very important."

That district is a mix of affluent residential areas, gritty industrial and commercial zones and working-class neighborhoods that includes parts of Sherman Oaks, Valley Glen, Studio City, North Hollywood, Sunland-Tujunga, Lake View Terrace, Shadow Hills, La Tuna Canyon and Van Nuys.

For 30 years, the district was represented by Wachs, who resigned last year to head an art foundation in New York.

The timing of Greuel's first run for public office helped shape her philosophy.

She took office when her district and the rest of the Valley were threatening to break away from L.A. because of dissatisfaction with the amount of attention being paid by City Hall. Her district is home to breakaway leaders including Valley VOTE President Jeff Brain, who said he admires how Greuel has addressed secessionists' concerns.

Greuel is part of a new generation of City Council members who have taken over thanks largely to term limits. By July, 14 of the 15 council seats will have changed hands within a four-year period, and the dean of the council will be Cindy Miscikowski, who was elected in 1997.



APPRECIATED: Before helping to fill a pothole in July in North Hollywood, Wendy Greuel, left, gets a hug from Lillian Scharf.

Like several other new council members, however, Greuel came up through the City Hall political system, so she knows whom to call to get a tree trimmed or a stop sign installed.

She started out as an intern for Wachs, worked as an aide to Mayor Tom Bradley and was a regional administrator with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development before she left public service to become an executive with the entertainment firm DreamWorks SKG.

In her first try for public office, with backing from DreamWorks moguls Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg and David Geffen, Greuel won an upset victory last April against Assemblyman Tony Cardenas, beating him by fewer than 250 votes out of more than 29,000 cast.

"I'm not surprised nobody ran against her this time because they would have a tough

time," said Polly Ward, vice president of the Studio City Residents Assn. "She is doing a great job. She is everywhere. She is very smart. She is very energetic. She is very responsive."

Businessman James Cordaro, who also ran against Greuel last year, said she benefited from a redistricting plan that gave Cardenas a largely Latino district to run in next door so that he did not have to challenge Greuel to a rematch.

Last June, the City Council took half of the 2nd District and combined it with other predominantly Latino communities to form a new 6th District where Cardenas is favored to win.

Cordaro said that, redistricting aside, he thinks Greuel has avoided a reelection challenge largely because she is viewed as doing a good job. She returns phone calls, acts quickly on constituent complaints and has

brought city meetings into the district so residents do not have to drive downtown to participate, Cordaro said.

"I don't think she has been sucked into the deep-rooted backroom politics downtown," he said.

While devoting much of her energy to district problems, Greuel also has taken on some high-profile citywide issues, although with mixed results.

She helped win passage of ordinances cracking down on street racing, and was instrumental in getting business tax relief for small ventures. However, when Greuel and Councilwoman Janice Hahn proposed a borough system of government as an alternative to secession, her colleagues shot down the idea. Greuel and Hahn also failed to block the Los Angeles Police Department's controversial plan to stop responding to unverified burglar alarms.

Although neither effort was successful, Greuel has won praise from some colleagues for trying to find middle ground on contentious issues. And she considers her work on the alarm issue successful, because a task force has been set up by the council to look at alternatives.

"You may not get everything you want, but you have to be willing to challenge the system," she said.

Government reform also is still alive, she maintains. Greuel said she has hired as consultant Raphael Sonenshein, a professor of political science at Cal State Fullerton, to look at reorganizing city government. The study will consider giving more power to the burgeoning system of neigh-

borhood councils and the creation of a borough system.

Her agenda for a new term includes hiring more police in an effort to reduce crime, and reforming the city's business tax system, which has been criticized as convoluted and harmful to companies.

Greuel has had an eventful 11 months, even discounting her role in pushing for government reform. She married a former campaign volunteer in July and announced in January that she is pregnant.

Although she is unopposed for reelection, Greuel has been walking door-to-door in the district to talk to voters and attending a series of teas and campaign forums to let her constituents know she wants their vote.

"They are a little surprised to see me, especially since I am unopposed," Greuel said, but added, "I believe you should take nothing for granted."

Nor are her struggles with the city bureaucracy over.

Greuel recently told a group of business leaders at a lunch in Van Nuys a story about one recent brush with bureaucratic red tape that shows she still faces a tough challenge getting City Hall to pay attention to her district.

It seems Greuel would drive every day past a Department of Water and Power building that was scarred with graffiti. Several calls to the DWP failed to get the vandalism cleaned up.

Finally, the councilwoman became so frustrated that she sarcastically suggested the DWP either clean it up or send her a key so she could do the job.

"They showed up at my office with the key," she said.