

# Election 2016: How the Walnut council race is getting ugly

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By [Steve Scauzillo](#), San Gabriel Valley Tribune

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WALNUT >> With less than two weeks to go, the [contentious City Council election](#) in this bedroom community has turned even more combative, with unflattering campaign fliers arriving in resident mailboxes and one candidate taking the unusual step of returning campaign money to avoid the taint of conflict of interest.

Since the close of registration Monday, mail-in ballots have been pouring into City Hall, said City Clerk Teresa de Dios. She declined to say how many ballots she'd received. Polls open April 12 at six locations throughout this upper-middle-class community, which has experienced [fissures in its once rock-solid relationship with Mount San Antonio College](#) and among members of the City Council who've argued over who should be mayor and who should be city attorney.

During a [candidates forum at Walnut Senior Citizens Center](#), candidate Bella Cristobal was asked whether a \$1,000 donation from Mt. SAC trustee David Hall was a conflict of interest, since the city has taken the college to court, naming Hall and five other trustees in the civil action.

The college wants to build a five-story parking garage at the edge of the Timberline neighborhood and turn a vacant hillside at Grand Avenue and Amar Road into [an 11-acre solar farm](#) without obtaining city permits. The college, located on 411 acres in Walnut, says it doesn't need the city's approval. But the city has sued, asking a court to grant it control over these projects. [The case](#), set to resume in Los Angeles Superior Court in June, is the culmination of a [querulous, town-versus-gown dynamic](#) in this city of 17,600 registered voters.

What two years ago could have been seen as a positive — monetary support from a Mt. SAC board member — has morphed into controversy. That's why Cristobal on Monday said she has returned the \$1,000 contribution to Hall.

In a statement, Cristobal said she and Hall both attend St. Lorenzo Ruiz Catholic Church and are friends. She praised Hall for supporting education at the college and in the city.

"In my case, returning his donation was my decision. I did it to appease everyone who may have doubts in their minds," she said.

Running for three seats are: Eric Ching, 49, incumbent; Cristobal, 66, challenger; Dino Pollalis, 53, challenger; Andrew Rodriguez, 23, challenger; Betty Tang, 49, challenger; and Nancy Tragarz, 53, incumbent. Tony Cartagena, in his 16th year on the council, is not running, meaning at least one new member will be elected.

A resident group, [United Walnut Taxpayers, has led the fight against the Mt. SAC projects](#), a central issue in the campaign.

“I think she’s returning the money because of the pressure she’s received from the residents,” said Layla Abou-Taleb, UWT founder and president.

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Open-government advocate Gil Aguirre said a candidate accepting campaign money from an opponent in a lawsuit is legal and is not a conflict of interest. But such contributions could raise eyebrows, he said.

“Why would you take money from someone who represents the entity who is costing your city thousands of dollars in legal fees?” asked Aguirre, who has followed Walnut politics closely.

“I’m glad to see her return the money,” he added. “That is the right thing to do. It is the smart thing to do.”

Money and political action committees — independent expenditure groups — are part of the small city’s expensive election cycle this year. A group called Citizens for Family Values to Oppose Betty Tang for Walnut City Council 2016 has spent \$2,007.45 on mailers, both in English and Chinese, that attack Tang as someone who has had extramarital affairs, is immoral and can’t be trusted. A group with a different but similar name formed to oppose Tang spent \$820 in 2015, city campaign records show.

“I am not going to engage in a public pingpong match about some imaginary story that my opponents have created to distract the voters,” Tang wrote in an emailed response. “The nasty and untrue comments being made about me are just more of the dirty politics that have become the hallmark of campaigns in the city of Walnut.”

Councilwoman Mary Su, whom Tang ran against in 2014, has donated \$700 to the group. Su and Mayor Robert Pacheco are supporting Cristobal and Pollalis. They are not supporting Tang, nor the two incumbents, Tragarz and Ching.

Walnut resident Lorraine Martinez, who received a flier that reproduced an article from a local Chinese newspaper including allegations about Tang from Qin (Jun) Chen — a former friend and campaign supporter who is listed as forming the PAC in 2015 against Tang and donating \$500 — said she was “disgusted” by the mudslinging in Walnut.

“I’m a 38-year resident of Walnut and it seems the circus that we have as the City Council gets worse every year. I’m disgusted at the hearsay and the low level other candidates are stooping to,” Martinez wrote in an email to this newspaper.

Tang’s husband, Tony Tang, who is listed in court documents as Shing Ming Tang, filed for divorce in July 2014, citing irreconcilable differences. Betty Tang is listed as Ying Yu in those documents.

The two are due back in court April 11, the day before the election, documents show.

Tang spent around \$100,000 in 2014 and has spent about \$70,000 so far in this campaign. Su spent \$209,000 in 2014-2015 and has about \$27,000 left in her campaign chest. Cristobal has received \$26,390. Pollalis is not accepting any donations; Rodriguez raised \$4,872; Ching has received \$30,764; Tragarz, \$5,387.

When new campaign reports are filed with the City Clerk on Thursday, more money and mailers for the April 12 election are anticipated.

“That is just mind-boggling. Why would anyone spend \$200,000 just to get a seat on a little city council. Those are insane amounts,” Aguirre said.