

A fighter

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Mayor Sanders merits a second term to spur reform The Union-Tribune Endorses

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By his own admission, Mayor Jerry Sanders is a “boring leader.” He isn't flashy, to be sure, as he labors day to day like a laconic auto mechanic with his head buried under the hood, tuning up the machinery of city government.

The question for voters on June 3 is whether Sanders is making enough progress to merit a second term. The answer, in our view, is an unhesitating Yes.

When Sanders came to office in the crisis-filled atmosphere of late 2005, San Diego was trapped in a devastating spiral, with bankruptcy looming ever nearer. Calmly, resolutely – and, yes, ploddingly – Sanders went about overhauling the city's finances. And he did so in the face of tremendous resistance from entrenched interests, including the powerful public employee unions, some members of the City Council and City Attorney Mike Aguirre.

Under Sanders' steady prod, San Diego completed the controversial Kroll investigation, which cleared the way for a settlement of the Securities and Exchange Commission's enforcement action against the city. In incremental steps, the mayor reshaped the city's finances and began paying the full annual contribution to the pension system, putting it on a path to pay off its staggering debt on a 20-year amortization schedule. Meanwhile, by holding the line on raises for most workers, Sanders cut the retirement system's long-term liability, which was further reduced by a relatively strong stock market. And despite Aguirre's obstructionist interference, Sanders completed a string of long-delayed audited financial statements, the lack of which had locked San Diego out of the municipal bond market for more than four years.

So, where do we stand today? The most telling assessment occurred last week, when Standard & Poor's restored San Diego's credit rating with a “positive” outlook. Thus the city has cleared, at long last, the final barrier to financial stability. This singular achievement is enough to warrant Sanders' re-election.

But what of his opponent, businessman Steve Francis, who has punctured all precedents by lavishing millions of dollars on a television campaign to unseat Sanders?

Unlike three years ago, when Francis advanced tough-minded ideas to restore San Diego's financial health, his current campaign is devoid of solutions. He assails Sanders relentlessly from a highly scripted playbook written by expensive out-of-town political consultants. But Francis is surprisingly tongue-tied when asked for his own answers to San Diego's challenges. To our disappointment, he dodges straightforward questions in an opportunistic bid to gain the backing of the mayor's opponents, most notably the labor unions that want to return to the discredited policies of the past.

Taking pandering to a new level, Francis stood beside Councilwoman Donna Frye last week and demagogically denounced Proposition C, a key reform sought by Sanders and endorsed by the city's SEC-approved monitor, Stanley Keller. Even more dismaying, some of Francis' TV ads have disseminated outright falsehoods, such as the claim that San

Diego is bankrupt.

In short, Francis has ceased to be a serious voice for reform but rather a highly politicized parody of reform.

Like many San Diegans, we are disappointed that the mayor has shown scant leadership in finding a new airport or in keeping the Chargers here. But the simple reality is that, under Jerry Sanders, San Diego has finally emerged from the dark catacombs of financial chaos into daylight. Yet much more work needs to be done, including fully implementing the financial controls called for in the Kroll report, including Proposition C, which would establish an independent audit committee to oversee the city's finances. Sanders is a fighter who has shown he can get these difficult things done, which is why he deserves to be re-elected.