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First & Spring

Will Ryu stir the pot or play ball with Wesson?



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By David Zahniser • Contact Reporter

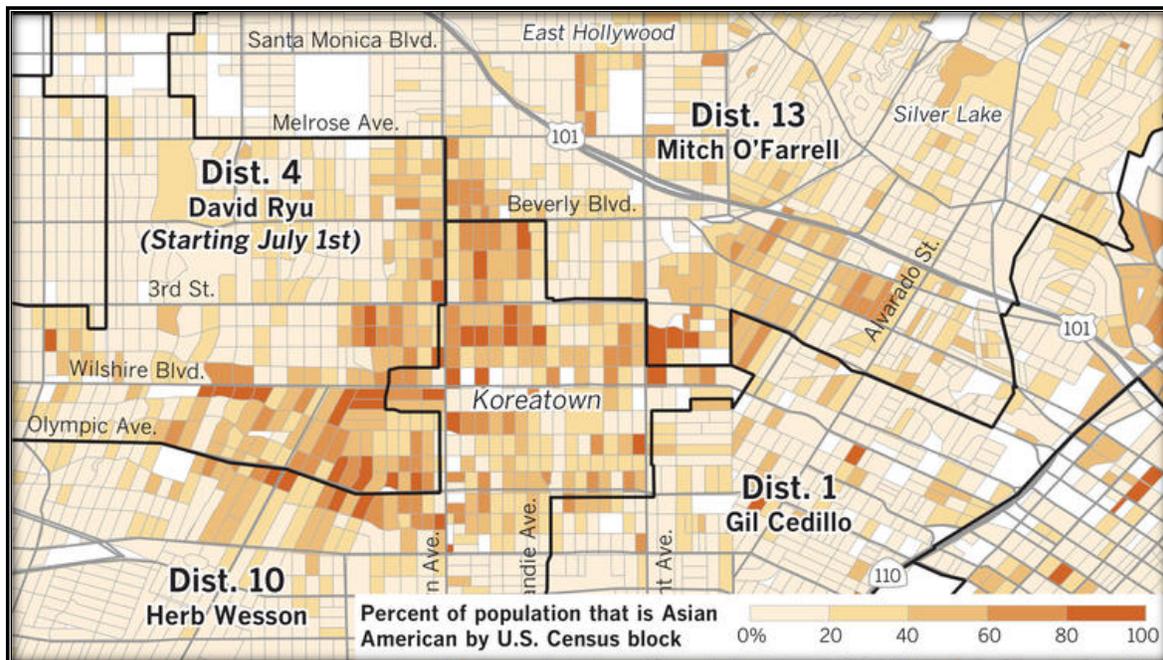
For the last two months, Los Angeles City Council President Herb Wesson was a reliable ally of Carolyn Ramsay, helping her as she ran in last week's election for the seat being vacated by her former boss, Councilman Tom LaBonge.

Ramsay, who had described Wesson as a mentor and role model, secured the council president's endorsement right after the March primary. Wesson hosted a fundraiser for Ramsay the following month, helping her campaign pull in more than \$68,000 in a single day.

Voters made a different choice, electing hospital executive David Ryu, who ran on the idea that the status quo is not working at City Hall. How Ryu, a self-proclaimed outsider, will interact with Wesson, the consummate insider, will be one of the more intriguing storylines of the next year.

Wesson, a former Assembly speaker, has kept a tight rein on the council as it confronted such issues as increasing the minimum wage, boosting voter turnout and regulating street vending. Ryu, on the other hand, has raised the expectation among his most passionate supporters that he will shake things up. But that could prove difficult in a chamber that runs on glad-handing, compromise and relationships.

In that environment, will Ryu — the city's first Korean American councilman — take a confrontational approach to Wesson and his new colleagues? Or will he be quietly socialized by the council president, who presides over a body known for voting in lockstep?



Ryu's background suggests he will not rush in and upend the proverbial furniture. The 39-year-old spent six years working for former L.A. County Supervisor Yvonne Burke, no one's idea of a firebrand. As a candidate, he had the support of mainstream political figures, including state Treasurer John Chiang and former Assembly Speaker John Pérez.

"I don't think [Ryu] wanted to rage against the machine," said political consultant Michael Trujillo, who did not work on either campaign. "I think he wanted to have a long talk with it."

Ryu will take office July 1, representing a serpentine district that winds its way from Silver Lake to the Miracle Mile and then into the San Fernando Valley. He will have a few things in common with Wesson, whose district runs from Koreatown south to Leimert Park.

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Tony Fisch, Hollywood neighborhood activist on the election of David Ryu

Both men gained experience in county government, working as staffers for Burke. Both have districts that include the greater Koreatown area. And both are skilled at pulling in campaign contributions.

That could lead to competition for the same donors in the city's Korean American business community, said neighborhood activist Grace Yoo, who ran against Wesson and lost this year. "There will certainly be a rivalry factor in that," she said.

Wesson, who has served on the council for a decade, said he expects to get along with Ryu just fine. The job of a council president, he emphasized, is to help the 14 other members become successful. Ryu, he pointed out, had few serious policy disagreements with Ramsay.

"I don't think there's going to be a problem with him at all," Wesson added.

Ryu struck a similar theme, saying he spoke with Wesson after the election and looks forward to working with him. In the months ahead, Ryu plans to focus on mansionization, better delivery of basic services and more transparency on spending by his council office.

"The election is over, and now it's about moving the city of Los Angeles forward," he said.

For some, Ryu's victory is being greeted as the great Redistricting Revenge, a clear sign of blowback from the 2012 vote to redraw council district boundaries. Wesson shepherded those 15 district maps to a vote, despite protests from Koreatown activists. At the time, Ryu opposed the new boundaries and testified against them.

Koreatown activists wanted a district that included their neighborhood with Thai Town and Historic Filipinotown — part of a large effort to enhance the clout of Asian American voters. Wesson opted to keep Koreatown primarily in his district, which includes part of South Los Angeles.

That dispute, says Yoo, only intensified the hunger among Korean Americans for a representative at City Hall. At least 50 people who were involved in the 2012 redistricting debate signed up to help the Ryu campaign, she said. On election day, Ryu picked up 85% of the vote in one Koreatown-area precinct, according to a Times analysis of unofficial results.

Ryu said LaBonge's constituents were also unhappy with the boundary changes, which caused their district to span from Los Feliz to Sherman Oaks. On various issues, he added, residents felt their voices "weren't being heard." Wesson, for his part, said Ryu's victory was the result of a smart campaign, not a three-year-old redistricting vote. "He won because he connected with the people," Wesson said.

That connection has also raised the bar for Ryu. Voters fully expect him to stir the pot and be a "change agent," said Hollywood neighborhood advocate Tony Fisch. "If I was a City Hall incumbent, or a Herb Wesson, I would think this was a wake-up call," said Fisch, who voted for Ryu.

During his campaign, Ryu also picked up support from those who have been at odds with Wesson or the city as a whole. Land-use lawyer Robert Silverstein, who has sued repeatedly over development projects, backed Ryu at the last minute. Councilman Bernard C. Parks, a Wesson critic who has been at the losing end of several 14-1 votes, also endorsed him.

Ryu said he planned to rely on Parks as an informal advisor. But he also promised to strike a balance between confrontation and conciliation. "I'm going to make sure to speak up when I see

things I don't agree with," he said. "But at the same time, you have to work collegially with your colleagues. You need seven other votes."

For Ryu, one possible path can be seen in the career of Councilwoman Nury Martinez, who won a San Fernando Valley seat in 2013. That year, Martinez pulled off a come-from-behind victory even though her opponent had the backing of Mayor Eric Garcetti, Wesson and other parts of the city establishment.

After it was over, Martinez set up a two-hour dinner meeting with the mayor to discuss ways of working together. She also forged ties with Wesson, who now appears to be grooming her for a leadership position. "I wasn't a sore winner," she said.

Martinez said she quickly mended fences because she needed to deliver for her district, which includes Van Nuys and Panorama City. "You need to build relationships," she said. "That's how you get things done."