

District 3 primary race swirls over rural Napa County Upvalley has more vines than people



April 26, 2014 • [PETER JENSEN](#)

The Upvalley 3rd District seat on the Napa County Board of Supervisors encompasses the heart and soul of the Napa Valley — the Agricultural Preserve — and the postcard views of rows upon rows of vineyards up and down Highway 29 and Silverado Trail.

Stretching from Salvador Avenue north to Mount St. Helena, and from the ridge of the Mayacamas east to Knoxville, the 3rd District is easily the largest district geographically in the county. It's also the only district whose supervisor doesn't live in Napa or American Canyon.

This year, incumbent and St. Helena attorney Diane Dillon is seeking her fourth term by squaring off with challenger Lewis Chilton, a small-business owner in Yountville and the town's vice mayor, in a contest that will be decided in the June 3 primary.

The district is the best example in Napa County politics of the divide between the Upvalley and the south county, said Mel Varrelman, who held the 3rd District seat from 1982 to 2002.

Decades of growth in Napa and American Canyon outpacing that of Yountville, St. Helena and Calistoga have dragged the five supervisor districts' boundaries farther and farther south to where the people are, Varrelman said. The districts have to have equal numbers of residents.

That's created a situation where one person represents almost the entire, lightly populated Ag Preserve, and the billions of dollars in wine grapes it protects. While all supervisors say protecting the Ag Preserve is their top priority, only one has to answer to voters who live closest to it, Varrelman said.

The 3rd District has been the epicenter of other landmark land-use regulations such as the passage of the Winery Definition Ordinance and Measure J, which restricts the commercial development potential of ag land, in 1990. It was center stage for the erosion control battles in

the hillsides in the late 1990s, and other, earlier measures to stem the development potential of the hills, said Volker Eisele, a grapegrower in Chiles Valley east of Lake Hennessey.

Those land-use changes required support of the wine industry, voters and the elected officials, Varrelman said. But Eisele said the challenge for slow-growth activists and agricultural preservationists has always been convincing city voters of the importance of the land-use measures.

“In a way, the district mirrors the county very well,” Eisele said. “You have city folks that decide the vote. These are, generally speaking, votes that are disconnected or not connected to agriculture. This is one of the major challenges for us here.”

Upvalley residents may not be aware of the southern shift, Varrelman said.

“I don’t think they realize what’s happening,” Varrelman said. “The incorporation of American Canyon ... was the first step of shifting the population basis south. For them, it’s a stretch to see how urbanization down in American Canyon affects somebody up in Calistoga. People just don’t connect it.”

But issues such as growth and development, traffic, affordable housing and water span the length of the valley, he notes. Planned growth in Napa, American Canyon and at Napa Pipe will impact the Upvalley communities, but will also eventually move the 3rd District boundaries even farther south, Varrelman said.

“Then I think the ag industry will lose some of its representation,” Varrelman said. “When Napa Pipe builds out we’re going to see the 3rd District shift farther south. This is what happens when you urbanize.”

The redistricting three years ago is the latest evidence of this trend, as the 3rd District picked up Yountville and new areas of north Napa, which it had never had before, he said. This election is the first test of the new boundaries.

This year also marks another new wrinkle for the 3rd District — the registered voters within the district’s incorporated cities now outnumber those in the unincorporated area. The district has 15,218 active registered voters, and 8,377 live in the cities and town, while 6,841 live outside city boundaries.

That’s a flip from 2010, when Dillon eked out re-election over Pope Valley resident Jeff Parady. In the November general election that year, the unincorporated area had 7,014 registered voters compared with the cities’ 6,432 voters.

Parady won the unincorporated area 56 percent to Dillon’s 44 percent, but she topped him in the cities 59 percent to 41 percent. Dillon won re-election with 51 percent of the vote.

This highlights the difficulties the 3rd District supervisor faces — the issues important to voters in the relatively new subdivisions of north Napa will likely be completely different from the ones

facing residents of rural Berryessa Estates. A similar dichotomy exists between the needs of Yountville, with its luxury restaurants and hotels, and the anti-development attitudes existing in Angwin.

“I think the 3rd District plays a unique role on the Board of Supervisors,” Varrelman said. “They can be the voice that doesn’t have to listen to the urban population. The Upvalley supervisor has to constantly remind folks in Napa — the people that work in the industries up here don’t just sit out in gazebos sipping wine all day.”