

New DA eyes gang injunctions

We will attempt to invite Mark Peterson to the first Gang Task Force meeting in November to further explain his strategy with injunctions now that he said fighting gangs is going to be one of his priorities.

Peterson talks plans for Contra Costa DA's office

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MARTINEZ -- Now that voters have settled the long, contentious race that divided the Contra Costa County prosecutors' office, District Attorney-elect Mark Peterson says he's focused on the future.

"I view it as from this day forward, it's a brand-new situation," said Peterson, the 25-year deputy district attorney who was opposed by the current administration and the prosecutors union. "I'm going to be DA, we have an office filled with good people and we are going to be just fine."

He's looking at healing divisions in his office, going after gangs and combating truancy.

The 52-year-old Concord resident was elected in a runoff Tuesday, beating his heavily endorsed opponent Dan O'Malley by nearly 16 percentage points -- more than 29,000 votes, according to unofficial election results with late mail-in ballots yet to be counted.

The hard-fought race began in early 2009 with three candidates vying to succeed retiring District Attorney Robert Kochly. The June primary narrowed the race to Peterson and O'Malley. It was also among the most sensational local races, with tense debates, harsh criticisms, biting ads and allegations of unethical and illegal campaigning. All the while, the District Attorney's Office itself struggled with a budget crisis that cut staffing to an all-time low and a rape scandal involving two former colleagues that exposed a lurid office culture.

Peterson said he will use vacation time to discuss priorities with county leaders before he is sworn in Jan. 3. He has three priorities of his own: bringing change to the office and its culture, crime prevention, and gangs.

First, he said, he will re-evaluate the office to see what's working, what isn't, and how to best allocate resources. He plans to improve internal communication and to reach a shared vision with the staff through one-on-one and group meetings. He said the office will begin using civil gang injunctions to prohibit specific gang members from associating in public, a tool used successfully elsewhere to curb gang violence. The injunctions will start first in Richmond, and then possibly in Antioch, Peterson said.

For crime prevention, Peterson said he wants to launch an anti-truancy program in West Contra Costa County similar to one that has seen success in San Francisco, in which parents are held criminally liable for truant children.

"I think we can implement programs that don't cost a great deal but can make a big impact on the community," Peterson said. "Our office does a very good job prosecuting criminals, and has for many years. Now, we need to do much more to prevent crime and, in the long run, that will bring dividends for all of us."