

For all-female council, town's protection vital

By Zeke McCormack
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KINGSBURY — Despite spearheading a successful campaign to incorporate part of this small town and being unchallenged in her quest to pre-empt its inaugural City Council, Shirley Nolen wasn't prepared for the first time someone called her "mayor" in public.

"I was kind of taken aback," Nolen said of the restaurant encounter after the decision last week by Guadalupe County commissioners to cancel the Nov. 3 city election in Kingsbury and to declare the unopposed candidates — Nolen and two other women — the winners.

They won't take office until that date. They foresee a city

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Nolen



Ignasiak



Heinemeier

WOMEN

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run by volunteers without a property tax but are cramming on how to launch it, pondering issues such as where the council will meet, who could serve as city marshal and even whether to have a city slogan.

"It absolutely weighs on me," said Nolen, an IT manager for an automotive parts plant. "It's one thing to take over as mayor, but it's a whole 'nother thing to start up a town, albeit a small town with only about 300 people."

The Class C general-law city will initially cover about 2 square miles, primarily narrow strips of land along roads that run through farmland, except for one larger area beside Interstate 10.

Nolen is the great-granddaughter of Joseph J. Mansfield, who served in the U.S. House from 1917 to 1947, and the granddaughter of Frank "Doc" Schmidt, the Guadalupe County clerk from 1939 to 1982.

Despite that pedigree, Nolen wasn't active in politics before working to form a city to protect this rural town from being absorbed by Seguin, its larger neighbor to the west, which extended its city limits into the area in 2013.

"We wouldn't have gone through the incorporation effort if not for the encroachment of Seguin," Nolen said.

Councilwomen-elect Alison Heinemeier and Janet Ignasiak are also new to politics, though Ignasiak served on the board of a private school.

But passage by a vote of 67-2 of the May 9 referendum on forming a city is a testament to the effectiveness of the local incorporation committee on which they served with Nolen.

The group built support for the effort by publishing a small newspaper, the Kingsbury Independent, and its fundraisers have generated \$5,000 in startup money for the city to supplement potential revenue from sales taxes and franchise fees.

Heinemeier, an artist, calls the prospect of establishing a city with friends "pretty cool."



Habitable Spaces / Courtesy photo

The all-female Kingsbury City Council plans to ask Seguin to release Kingsbury's downtown from its extraterritorial jurisdiction.

New town seeks its center

The old downtown of Kingsbury isn't actually in the newly incorporated city of that name, but since the new Kingsbury was created in reaction to Seguin's expansion of extraterritorial jurisdiction, its new city council will be trying to get it back, Seguin says it's open to discussion.

■ Seguin city limits
■ Seguin extraterritorial jurisdiction
▨ Traditional Kingsbury community



Sources: City of Seguin, City of Kingsbury

"I don't know how many all-women governments there are in Texas," she said. "I think it's kind of unusual."

Ignasiak, a massage therapist, calls the situation "wonderful."

"We're strong women and we're going to do just fine," she said.

The women's major objective upon taking office in November will be to ask Seguin to release the historic downtown area of Kingsbury from its extraterritorial jurisdiction. That area, referred to here as "the occupied zone," is where most local businesses are located.

"We intend to get it back," Heinemeier said.

Seguin officials, already facing a lawsuit by a resident in the zone who is challenging the claimed ETJ boundaries, say they await a formal request from the Kingsbury City Council, once it forms.

"The city is always open to discussion and negotiation of these issues," Seguin spokeswoman Morgan Ash said.

The lawsuit was filed by Bob Grafe who, like many others in western Kingsbury, was upset at being included in Seguin's ETJ, which effectively gives that city authority to annex the area in the future.

"My family and I didn't locate in Kingsbury to be part of Seguin," he said. "It's a totally

different mindset living in a rural community than it is living in a city that is bent on rapid expansion. That's the city of Seguin. I'm not interested in it."

In a motion seeking dismissal of the lawsuit, Seguin City Attorney Andrew Quittner argued that the two-year statute of limitations had expired before Grafe filed the lawsuit, that he lacks standing to contest the legality of Seguin's 2013 annexation ordinances and that Grafe's legal arguments are flawed.

Grafe is confident about Kingsbury's inaugural council members, with whom he worked on the committee and the newspaper, which has published twice.

"They want to do it right, and I think they will," said Grafe, a former editor at the Seguin Gazette.

The women are being advised by Art Martinez De Vara, who's helped form several cities, including Von Ormy in Bexar County, where he served as mayor. He often provides free advice to other communities.

"Texas averages about 1.2 new cities a year. It's kind of rare," he said. "Kingsbury

highlights the case of a small community that wakes up one day and discovers an urban encroachment, and that spurs the desire to incorporate."

Martinez, the former chief of staff and current general counsel to state Sen. Konni Burton, R-Colleyville, said forming a city will be a plus in negotiations with Seguin, noting, "Before they incorporated, it was just residents vs. a city. Now it's city vs. city."

Attorney Sam Drugan, a Kingsbury resident, also worked on the incorporation committee and has agreed to serve as city attorney, for free. "There just didn't happen to be a lady lawyer sitting on the committee," he joked.

Nolen is getting used to being called "mayor," which occurred again Thursday at the Kingsbury Volunteer Fire Department, whose auxiliary she has led for several years.

"One firefighter said 'You're the new mayor, aren't you?' " she recalled with pride and a little sheepishness, noting, "They don't realize how much we're learning as we go. We don't know what we don't know yet."

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More: Additional coverage on Kingsbury's concerns about Seguin.