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ELECTIONS '11 | DALLAS MAYOR

Rawlings wins — with positive vision

Business-driven campaign pushed growth



Mona Reeder/Staff Photographer

"People want optimism in this city," said Mayor-elect Mike Rawlings, celebrating Saturday with friend Ed Coppola (left). His gregarious campaigning and $2.2 million war chest overwhelmed opponent David Kunkle.

New city leader faces a host of challenges

By RUDOLPH BUSH
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When Mike Rawlings is sworn in as Dallas mayor eight days from now, he will come to City Hall with the support of most of his council colleagues and the strong backing of the city's business community.

Those are important political advantages for a new mayor to have, especially one elected with one of the lowest voter turnouts in memory for a mayoral race.

Whatever kind of honeymoon Rawlings enjoys will be tested by a series of tough issues that could separate City Council members along the racial and geographical lines that Rawlings has

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Candidate also pledged to tackle school problems

By RUDOLPH BUSH
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Mike Rawlings was elected Dallas mayor Saturday, proving once again that a business-driven, pro-growth message resonates with the city's voters in good times and bad.

The former top executive at Pizza Hut easily overcame former Police Chief David Kunkle, becoming the latest in a long line of business leaders to step into Dallas' political fray and emerge as the city's top elected official.

He did it by promising time and again to focus on "economic development, economic development, economic development."

Saturday evening, at a gathering of support-

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Rawlings wins with business message

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ers at the Oak Lawn restaurant Meddlesome Moth, Rawlings said that a great message and a great organization propelled him to victory.

"It was a message of growth and a positive vision for the city of Dallas. We can grow and have strong neighborhoods. People want optimism in this city," he said.

Kunkle conceded about 9:30 p.m. in a call to Rawlings.

Kunkle said he hoped that despite his defeat, his message resonates in the city.

"There's going to be a different mix on the City Council, and some of those people are firmly committed to that concept" of strong neighborhoods, he said.

Rawlings' winning message evolved over the course of his five-month campaign to include taking on the enormous challenge of improving the city's troubled public schools by becoming more involved in its politics both at the council and state level.

He also repeatedly said he will make development of southern Dallas a cornerstone of his time as mayor, something previous mayors have promised but found difficult to deliver.

Rawlings vowed to bring increased ethics and transparency to City Hall, even as he was questioned during the campaign about the role he played in the award of a trail-safety campaign contract to a friend's advertising firm.

And he also adopted some of his opponents' best messages, saying the city should be able both to build up and support its neighborhoods and to focus on major city-shifting projects such as the convention center hotel and the Arts District.

Rawlings' defeated Kunkle on a day when voter turnout fell well short of the May 14 totals.

The runoff was a culmination of an abbreviated campaign that began in earnest in early February, shortly after it became clear that Mayor Tom Leppert would resign.

The May 14 general election pitted four candidates for the office and ended with Rawlings leading Kunkle by 6,000 votes. He never surrendered his frontrunner status.

Through both the general election and the runoff, Rawlings, the city's former homeless czar and Park Board president, easily raised cash to fund a massive campaign organization that engaged powerful political consultants north and south of the Trinity River.

According to his final campaign report, Rawlings raised $2.2 million, and he spent it widely on advertising that quickly raised his name identification and on a get-out-the-vote operation that pulled his supporters to the polls.

He also locked up key endorsements from the city's political and business elite. All but three council members endorsed him, and none endorsed Kunkle. Influential celebrities like Roger Staubach and Jerry Jones, straddling Dallas' fascination with sports and business, backed him.

His campaign followed a historically successful pattern — garnering support of the city's business community in the north and religious leaders in the south.

Despite that, he found himself in a tough fight with Kunkle, the city's most popular and successful police chief in years.

Kunkle entered the race almost on a whim, saying he wanted to give voice to a message that challenged the plans of the city's powerful business establishment.

From the outset, Kunkle promised to run a different kind of campaign. He all but avoided raising money, drawing in a little more than $200,000 — an amount that simply couldn't fund a serious advertising campaign. That left Kunkle to campaign largely on his reputation while spreading his message through dozens and dozens of forums where he often came off as stiff and technical next to the gregarious Rawlings.

Still, Kunkle's vision for the city engaged many voters. He argued that City Hall should focus less on big-ticket projects and more on improving the beauty and infrastructure of its neighborhoods. That would pay more dividends in long-term growth than the splashy projects that often enthrall and snare City Hall, he said.

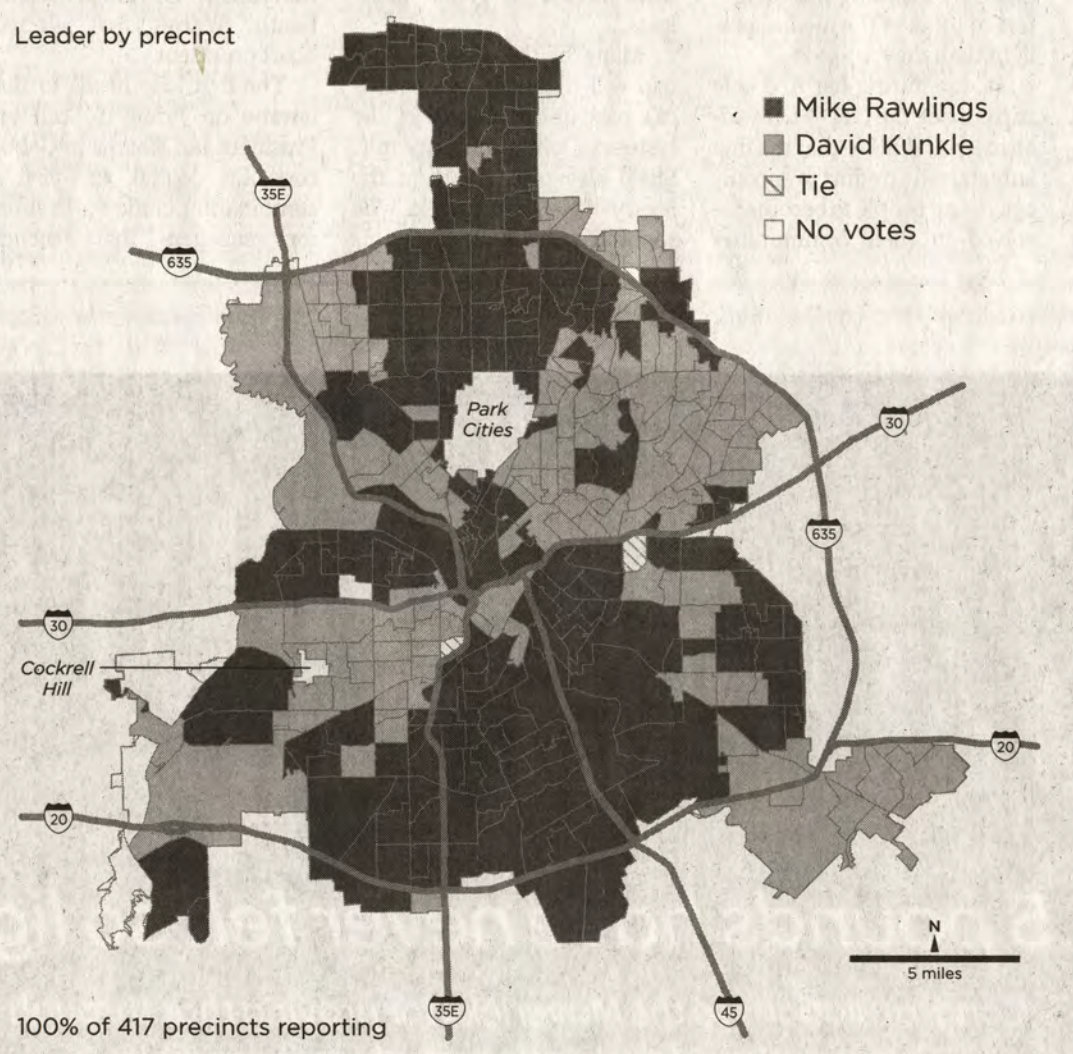
Kunkle was unabashedly opposed to the Trinity River toll road while Rawlings was noncommittal. The road has been a fixation of powerful interests in Dallas for years.

In forum after forum, Kunkle was careful not make broad promises about what he could do as mayor. He was clear about the office's limits, saying for example that he would not involve himself in school district politics. But he failed to fully capitalize on his greatest strength — as the man who turned around the Police Department, who helped make the city safer than it has been in decades.

And he resolutely refused to engage in the bloodier side of politics by openly attacking Rawlings. As a result, he quickly turned from the race's best-known candidate to underdog, leading to Rawlings' convincing victory.

How Dallas voted

Leader by precinct



100% of 417 precincts reporting

SOURCE: Dallas County Elections

Tom Setzer/Staff Artist



Joel Prince/Staff Photographer

David Kunkle waited on the phone for a live radio interview during his election day party at the San Francisco Rose.

AT A GLANCE
How Mike Rawlings won the mayor's race

1. Raised more $2 million, creating an organization that competed all across the city. In contrast, rival David Kunkle pulled in about $200,000 for his slingshot campaign.

2. Honed a message that challenged Dallas to be bold and innovative in solving its problems. While Kunkle was talking about improving neighborhoods, Rawlings vowed to revitalize southern Dallas, create jobs and put the Big D back in Dallas.

3. Got the support of key southern Dallas ministers and neighborhood leaders, who helped him win big in the southern sector.

4. Contrasted himself with Kunkle at several debates. Audiences sometimes saw his confidence as bluster but found him more mayoral than the socially awkward Kunkle.

5. Avoided the big mistake. He ran a generally error-free campaign that lacked a divisive issue among voters, and in the runoff, he played up his big-name supporters against Kunkle, who couldn't afford to fight back effectively.

WHAT'S NEXT
Seating the winners

On June 27:

- The Dallas City Council meets **to canvass returns and declare results** of the runoff.
- The new mayor and council members **are inaugurated and hold their first meeting**.

New mayor faces a host of challenges

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said he wants the council to move beyond.

How he deals with those in the next year will probably signal how successful a mayor he will be throughout his four-year term.

Here are the major challenges he faces:

Veteran council

When former Mayor Tom Leppert took office in 2007, he enjoyed a unique opportunity. Seven of his council colleagues were serving their first terms as well.

Dominated by new members, the council came as close to a fresh start as it could, and Leppert was able to quickly build relationships and coalitions.

The council that Rawlings inherits will have just two new members — Monica Alonzo and Scott Griggs. After leaving the council for six years, Sandy Greyson returns as a veteran of City Hall.

The council now has set alliances and voting blocs that aren't necessarily based on the issue at hand. That increases the challenge of managing votes and issues — a critical ability if a mayor hopes to have more power than his single vote and a bully pulpit.

Budget

For three straight years, the city budget has been in a bad spiral of increasing costs and decreasing revenues. Services have been cut, and taxes have been raised.

The picture is improving this year, but it isn't good. City Hall remains an estimated $32 million short of what it needs to maintain current services — and that after City Manager Mary Suhm announced plans to slash $20 million in services and lay off some 300 employees.

The cuts that Suhm recommended will leave the council with much to fret about because they include shutting down recreation centers and pools, cutting back on park maintenance and reducing funding for cultural programs.

Rawlings pledged not to support another increase in the city's tax rate, a position shared by most council members.

2012 bond program

The city of Dallas is saddled with $1.9 billion in outstanding general obligation debt that absorbs some 30 percent of property tax revenue.

That debt has funded projects from flood control and street repairs to the construction of libraries and parks.

Despite that, at least $6.4 billion in needed improvements remains, largely for streets and other transportation infrastructure.

But as City Hall's debt has climbed with bond issues in 1998, 2003 and 2006, property values have not kept pace.

That means a 2012 bond program must be relatively modest at $500 million to $600 million.

Throughout his campaign, Rawlings urged voters to "think big" about Dallas and pledged to support major projects.

But even if debt-weary voters are willing to pass a bond program in November 2012, there isn't likely to be much money for "think big" projects.

Trinity River

The most serious problem facing the Trinity River project isn't the toll road but how the city will repair its levees.

Rawlings must immediately join a process of spending perhaps $100 million in repairs to bring the levees to a 100-year flood protection standard.

Meanwhile, the sense of the Trinity project has changed greatly since a 2007 referendum on the toll road.

At that time, every council member but one — Angela Hunt — supported the road as part of a grander vision.

Now, at least three members — Hunt, Greyson and Griggs — staunchly oppose the road.

Rawlings has been noncommittal, saying the issue doesn't have to be addressed while questions over its funding and effect on flood safety remain unresolved.

Redistricting

In August, the new mayor will receive a redistricting plan from a commission that has spent months planning how to redraw the city's 14 council districts. That could spark the beginning of a contentious fight.

The council will have the option to alter the plan before approving a final version, and if it goes anything as it did 10 years ago, nasty racial politics will play a part.

There's a push to create at least one more predominately Hispanic district, given that group's surging population. But doing so would come at the expense of a district controlled by whites or blacks.

Rawlings has said he supports a plan that will keep neighborhoods intact under one representative, vs. spreading them out among several council members the way Pleasant Grove is today.

But doing that in the face of local political interests will prove tricky.

Staff writer Steve Thompson contributed to this report.

FAR NORTH DALLAS

Former council member wins seat

In the runoff for the Far North Dallas City Council seat, former council member Sandy Greyson defeated political newcomer and tea party organizer Donna Starnes.

Greyson and Starnes agreed on a number of issues, but Greyson was clearly the candidate with an established base of support in the district and a sense of the inner workings of City Hall.

Starnes was often short on details but said she offered a fresh perspective.

Despite the endorsement of outgoing council member Ron Natinsky and third-place finisher William Tsao, Starnes was not able to overcome Greyson's strong connection with district voters.

Greyson, who left the council six years ago due to term limits, is best known citywide for her staunch opposition to the Trinity River toll road, something on which Starnes would not take a position.

Both said they would refuse to raise the city's tax rate.

Rudolph Bush

QUICK TAKE

Will executive skills translate to council?



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Mike Rawlings has gone from self-proclaimed BMOC (Big Man on Campus) to Big Man on Council.

At least that's what he hopes.

The newly elected Dallas mayor now trades his football cleats and corporate executive background for a job trying to pull 14 disparate representatives in his direction.

It won't be easy.

The mechanics of Dallas government dilute a mayor's powers. City Manager Mary Suhm runs the day-to-day operations, and the council sets policy.

Once installed, Rawlings will determine the council agenda, but he has only one vote on the council and can't hire or fire anybody.

Still, he's the leader, under pressure to bring the council together to solve Dallas' problems.

Can he do it?

The former Pizza Hut executive cuts an imposing figure, talks tough and can get in your face. He's even a little arrogant, friends say.

Rawlings concedes he's impatient, something he'll have to work on a council that can get stubborn and ornery.

What happens if a majority, against Rawlings' will, want cuts in public safety to balance the budget?

How does he bridge the gap between northern and southern council members?

In the private sector, Rawlings was known for creating a good work environment and heaping his employees with praise for jobs well done.

That kind of approach — along with forging compromises when needed — will go a long way to mollify council members who aren't sure about the new guy.

Tom Leppert had nearly three years of smooth sailing but saw his relationship with the council crumble amid his pursuit of higher office, votes on no-bid contracts at Love Field and a property tax increase.

Rawlings has said he wants to make the council members, business leaders and neighborhood activists partners in his administration.

If he can offer them ownership in his efforts, he'll succeed.