

He's a new kind of candidate

Silvernale an openly gay man who wants to be a champion of the working class

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It's a new day in Austin politics when a council candidate wants to be a champion not for business, the environment or neighborhoods, but of the working class. Eric Silvernale is a high-school dropout who got his equivalency degree, years later started a bar and saw it go belly-up in 1994.

For more than a year, this 36-year-old candidate has worked as a clerk at Steve's Liquor & Fine Wine. As if to underscore loyalty to his chosen constituents, he offers as references not the usual cast of movers and shakers but bartenders, social workers and tow-truck drivers. "Eric is a voice for people like me, who go to work every day and struggle to pay their rent and buy groceries," says friend Paula Scogin, a bartender at Auntie Mame's.

Silvernale differs from typical council candidates in one other respect: he is openly gay. State Representative Glen Maxey paved the way for gay politicians when he was elected to represent Travis County's District 51 in 1991. Maxey's district, however, doesn't encompass the more conservative sectors of the city.

Silvernale says he does not plan to try to mobilize the support of the gay and lesbian community on behalf of his campaign. Scogin says, "Making this a big gay issue...would make it look like we need a gay council member. I've never heard him say that. 'Us,' for him, is the average citizen of Austin, not the average gay citizen."

Janet Duffy, a friend who's a licensed professional counselor and a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, thinks the sexuality issue shouldn't hurt Silvernale's chances. "I think there's enough highly educated people in Austin that if he gets to the heart of the issues, it really won't matter."

Issues are something Silvernale has thought about. He says the safety record of the Holly Street Power Plant has been “blown way out of proportion,” and the planned closure of that facility should be revisited. Silvernale also wants to revisit the city’s smoking ordinance: “I want to give the choice back to the owners of the building.”

When Robert Mueller Municipal Airport is closed down, Silvernale says, “It would be a good place for affordable housing.” He thinks the terminal building at Mueller would make a good spot for a new city hall.

Silvernale’s an unabashed advocate for a light-rail system, though a proposed route would cut within a few doors of the house where he grew up after his parents moved to Austin in 1965, and where he still lives with his mother.

He vows not to vote for a tax increase for at least two years, saying the city instead “needs to cut back on something.” He says he admires the stance of Priorities First, which defeated \$10 million in bonds for a baseball stadium. “They have the same goals I do, to minimize the cost of government, and put a stop to the ridiculous notion of spending money on ball parks until we get our infrastructure built.”

Silvernale ran for city council in 1994 in the Place 2 contest won by Ronney Reynolds, who pulled 39,980 votes, handily beating Mary Arnold, who pulled 32,168. Silvernale, who says he entered the 1994 race “to see how it works,” spent less than \$200 and got 776 votes. This time, he hopes to raise up to \$100,000 and run a serious campaign.

Still, his campaign help will all be volunteers, Silvernale says, including campaign manager Joe Meadows, who has never run a political campaign but has been chairman of the Democratic Party’s Precinct 356 since 1990 and claims grass-roots experience. “My job is to try to put together a campaign and put together volunteers who will hit the streets and knock doors,” Meadows says.

Silvernale says he would “not have a problem signing” the city’s Voluntary Campaign Contract, which limits a council candidate’s expenditures to \$75,000 (before runoff). But he and volunteer campaign manager Joe Meadows are still debating it and have not made a final decision.

Silvernale says money is a big obstacle to getting elected, but he will not make concessions to get it. "I don't want to have to adopt someone else's ideals to get their support," he says. "It's a representative government. My goal is to get people involved."

The only other candidate declared for the Place 1 council seat being vacated by Max Nofziger is Manuel Zuniga, a successful businessman and member of the Electric Utility Commission who was profiled by In Fact No. 13. Of Zuniga, Silvernale says, "He has definitely got the upper hand in knowledge. The difference will come in our visions of Austin." Silvernale says his own vision includes a compact city with light-rail service, with opportunities for small business and apartment communities. "Each neighborhood needs to be like a small city, with job opportunities and recreational opportunities. Everything should be right there."