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Editorial: Contra Costa voters should oust their ‘Bad Boy Assessor’

Twenty-eight years of Gus Kramer is enough. Elect Floy Andrews to bring ethics and integrity to the office.



Contra Costa Assessor Gus Kramer, left, faces his most serious election challenge in 28 years as opponent Floy Andrews, a member of the Assessment Appeals Board, has garnered the support of the entire county Board of Supervisors. (Staff archives/ Contributed photo)

By **EAST BAY TIMES EDITORIAL** |

PUBLISHED: March 26, 2022 at 5:30 a.m. | UPDATED: March 26, 2022 at 5:30 a.m.

After 28 years, Contra Costa voters should finally oust their scandal-plagued county assessor and replace him with an Assessment Appeals Board member who can bring ethics and integrity to the office.

Seven terms of Assessor Gus Kramer's personal and professional antics, his misuse of his office and his abusive behavior toward his employees is enough. It's time to put a responsible adult in charge of the county department that sets the tax values for \$241 billion of property.

Kramer won his first term as county assessor in 1994 by defeating a dead man. His opponent, Daniel Hallissy, died of a heart attack before the election, but his name remained on the ballot. Since then, Kramer has faced weak or no opposition every four years.

This time is different.

Elect Floy Andrews

Floy Andrews, an attorney and businesswoman appointed last year to the county Assessment Appeals Board, has garnered the bipartisan endorsements of all five county supervisors and the backing of the Contra Costa Central Labor Council in her quest to oust Kramer. She now also has our endorsement.

Voters should be looking for "somebody you can trust to not tip the scales one way or another," she says. "Honesty and integrity are not partisan." We agree.

Andrews brings management and legal experience from having worked for two major law firms and then served as vice president and associate general counsel for one of the state's major developers. But she jettisoned the big bucks in 2012 to study bioethics and then co-founded a small coffee roasting operation in Berkeley.

It's an eclectic background that should well-position her to provide the assessor's office with desperately needed leadership that respects the workers there while guiding residents and businesses large and small who seek a fair computation of their property tax assessments.

If she prevails in the June 7 election, she will be a breath of fresh air after nearly three decades of Kramer.

Misconduct accusation

In 2018, the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors [censured](#) Kramer after an independent investigator found that he more likely than not made inappropriate sexual comments to two women who worked in his department.

The county Civil Grand Jury investigated and accused Kramer of willful or corrupt misconduct in office, which led to a trial to determine whether he should be removed from office. During that trial, witnesses [testified](#) that Kramer bragged to employees of his "conquests" with women, made sexual comments about women's bodies and sent inappropriate text messages to one employee who had texted him on his vacation.

Kramer told two employees in the assessor's office that he gave a female relative a vibrator as a Christmas present, they testified. Another employee said Kramer had told a graphic story or joke about people having anal sex and had made racist comments to another employee, including using an offensive ethnic slur when speaking to an employee and saying to him that "white men would never vote for a f***** Mexican."

While Kramer's attorney, Michael Rains, disputed most of the allegations in court, he later [acknowledged](#) that the case "was frankly a wake-up call to Mr. Kramer and a reminder to anyone who knows about the case or heard about the case of the importance of how anyone conducts themselves with co-workers."

The case ended in a mistrial because jurors could not all agree whether most of the allegations constituted workplace harassment under state law or whether his conduct merited overturning the will of the voters by removing Kramer from office. Now voters get to weigh in.

What should be clear is that he doesn't deserve another term — not just because of his conduct toward other workers but also because of three decades of actions that were not at issue in the trial.

Transgressions list

Kramer has a long list of transgressions:

- The state Fair Political Practices Commission fined Kramer \$4,000 because he failed to disclose ownership of rental properties in Martinez when he was city clerk there.
- The FPPC [fined Kramer \\$5,500](#) after finding he didn't file nine reports disclosing late campaign contributions and did not properly disclose a loan on a semiannual campaign statement as required by law.
- Kramer demolished an asbestos-laden house he owned in Bay Point without notifying air board officials, resulting in a [\\$5,000 fine](#).
- He [retaliated](#) against one of his employees, resulting in a jury verdict and subsequent settlement of legal fees that cost county taxpayers a combined \$994,000.

- One of Kramer's properties was underassessed by his own office, allowing him to [avoid paying more than \\$21,000](#) in property taxes. After a reporter discovered it, Kramer called the woman who sold him the house. She said he wanted her to help him create a paper trail justifying the valuation.
- He used an arcane real estate transaction known as a gift deed that allowed him to [avoid paying transfer taxes](#) when acquiring millions of dollars of property in the county. Ethics laws limit gifts to public officials to a few hundred dollars a year.
- After news stories about those transactions, he amended years of state ethics forms because he had [failed to disclose ownership](#) of millions of dollars of property in the county and loans of hundreds of thousands of dollars to friends and associates.
- Kramer's office overvalued vacant dirt lots of a Pittsburg developer with whom the assessor had been publicly feuding, costing the company [well over \\$200,000](#) in additional taxes that year.
- Kramer's office [reassessed](#) his son and daughter-in-law's home, claiming incorrectly that they had converted their garage to living space. The reassessment came after Kramer had a falling out with them and they no longer permitted him to see his grandchildren. After the daughter-in-law complained, an appraiser inspected the house, and the reassessment was rescinded.
- He filed a tort [claim](#) against the Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association alleging that he should have been able [to double-dip](#), to draw his county pension and his county salary at the same time. He [never pursued](#) the case.
- He filed a civil rights lawsuit claiming county supervisors discriminated against him by not granting him pay raises other department heads had received. A federal judge [threw out](#) the case, concluding in essence that the board can use discretion when it awards raises.

- After the case against Kramer for misconduct in office ended in a mistrial, he sought county reimbursement of [\\$325,000](#) for his legal fees. The Board of Supervisors denied his claim.

Investigation killed

How has Kramer, dubbed "[The Bad Boy Assessor](#)" in his own office, survived all these years? Former Contra Costa County District Attorney Mark Peterson, later found guilty of [felony perjury, killed an investigation](#) into Kramer's private land deals over the objections of two deputies supervising the probe, those deputies said.

It's time to put this sad saga to an end.

This year, the county's political leaders are coalescing around Kramer's opponent. Voters should do the same. They should stop putting up with Kramer. For the sake of taxpayers, workers in the assessor's office and the integrity of the office, voters should end Kramer's reign.

They should elect Floy Andrews.

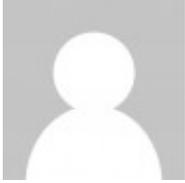
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