



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
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FRESNO—The Fresno County Democratic Party is deeply saddened at the sudden loss of José Ornelas. José was a member of the San Joaquin City Council having been elected in 2014 and reelected in 2018. He also served on the Fresno County Democratic Central Committee and the California Democratic Party’s Voter Services Committee.

“Fresno County Democrats have a big loss and void to fill,” says Ruben Zarate, chair of the Fresno County Democratic Party. “José’s work and value had been something we’d been longing for as far as activism goes from our west-side communities.”

A well-respected leader, José was a fighter on behalf of San Joaquin and other west-side communities. He worked aggressively to engage the community and formed a community group so that residents could more effectively address their concerns before the City Council. That group, New Alliance for Change in San Joaquin, will be one of his enduring legacies.

José is survived by his wife, Nadia, and six children.

Community leaders shared with us their thoughts on José:

“The city of San Joaquin and Fresno County has lost a dedicated civic leader whose service will be remembered for empowering his constituents to become engaged, to be heard and to be respected. My deepest sympathy to the Ornelas family during this difficult time of loss.”

—State Controller Betty Yee

“Council Member Ornelas was a true leader taking every opportunity to advocate for clean drinking water, workers’ rights and educational investment in the City of San Joaquin. In Council Member Ornelas, farmworker families in rural communities found a champion. My sincere condolences to the Ornelas family and the City of San Joaquin for this unexpected loss.”

—Rep. TJ Cox

“Councilmember José Ornelas set the standard for leading by example. He committed his life to advocating for his beloved San Joaquin by working to combat injustices, poverty and championing water quality issues in his community. Immediately after I took office, he was one of the first to meet with me to discuss the needs of his city. West-side communities have lost a true friend and supporter. My sincerest condolences to his family, and all of those who were touched by his life.”

—State Senate Anna Caballero

“We have lost a great advocate and human being. Council Member José Ornelas was a champion for west-side Fresno County communities. His leadership in fighting for water, funding and

resources for the City of San Joaquin did not go unnoticed. My wife, Elizabeth, and I send our deepest condolences to his wife, children, family and friends. He will be greatly missed.”

—Assembly Member Dr. Joaquin Arambula

“José felt the need to focus on the poor communities of western Fresno County by reminding us about the under-education of its youth and the denial of opportunities for the people of these impoverished communities. As a leader, José had the courage to fight to move these communities forward and to adopt a ‘Servant Leadership’ standard to improve the quality of life for all. José understood that those sitting at the tables of power continue to make decisions that have a negative impact on the most vulnerable.”

—Kerman City Council Member Espi Sandoval

“The sudden death of San Joaquin Council Member José Ornelas is a big loss for the west-side communities of the central San Joaquin Valley known as the Appalachia of the West. José was dedicated to increasing the quality of life for the west side by championing the right to have clean potable drinking water for all the west-side communities. He was a rising star within the Democratic Party taking positions on better education, immigration, decent wages and equality for all people in California. I will be missing a good friend, teacher and advisor. Instead of crying and sadness, José would tell us, like Mother Jones, ‘Don’t mourn, organize.’”

—Humberto Gomez Sr., community organizer

“José Ornelas was a good father, husband, coach and dedicated to working hard to become the best public servant in Fresno County. When the families of San Joaquin demanded quality drinking water, José was determined to work with State Senator Anna M. Caballero to do just that; an \$8 million grant was allocated!”

—Eliseo Gamiño, president of the Central Valley Leadership Round Table

“José became a friend who made me think deeply about many things, including the complexity of life in a small town that too many people easily pass by, without noticing what’s wrong or appreciating what’s right. I came to his town to study the voters who’d stopped practicing political self-determination and I stayed longer than I’d intended, because he and his generous family and friends gave me hope. I could see that if we could just resolve a few issues here and there, anything was possible—all across America. Like José, small towns in America tell us who we really are. More towns and cities need people who are invested in life like José was.”

—Halima Aquino, director of the Voter Engagement and Education Project (VEEP)

“In 2013, José Ornelas helped us form a community group, New Alliance for Change in San Joaquin. He was always concerned about his community, and together we were successful in having our voices heard about our problems with contaminated drinking water. He always had time to listen to us about the needs of the community, and if he could not help us he would reach outside the community for help. He was a great leader, and this is an enormous loss for our group and our community. He will not be forgotten and will always be in our hearts.”

—Eva Luna, president of New Alliance for Change in San Joaquin

“José was a humble person, a leader for the unheard, underrepresented, and gave the community of San Joaquin hope. José never forgot where he came from, from the state of Jalisco. He wanted

to make sure his community had equal opportunities in education, economic development and accessible potable water. His death unfortunately leaves a large abscess in our hearts, but I will always remember statements from some in the crowd, “Damn it, the Mexicans showed up,” well credit José, and this will continue to be his legacy. José was our John Lewis, without the notoriety or famous recognition, but he lives in our hearts.”

—Humberto Gomez Jr., Region 8 director of the California Democratic Party

“José was determined to improve the quality of life in his community. When he would encounter a roadblock (and there were many), he would quietly and doggedly persist until that obstacle had been overcome. He formed a community group to inform his service as a San Joaquin City Council member and, in turn, saw many of them become civically engaged. José was a beacon of light for the west side of Fresno County.”

—Michael D. Evans, former chair of the Fresno County Democratic Party

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