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Parker on Politics: Lee County candidates in campaign shuffle

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Lee County's election season ratcheted up a few notches this week when state Rep. Nick Thompson, R-Fort Myers, announced that he will run for the circuit judge post held by retiring Judge Thomas Reese.

That means Thompson's House seat, the only Lee seat to be completely inside the county and to include Fort Myers and part of Lehigh Acres, will be open and expected to attract a sizable contingent of candidates.

Republican activist Matt Caldwell, who ran unsuccessfully for a state Senate seat in the last election and is heading up Marco Rubio's U.S. Senate campaign in Lee, said he expects to run. Longtime business leader Cole Peacock said he's seriously considering the race.

Caldwell lives in the Lehigh Acres portion of the district, which includes Fort Myers and runs east and south to take in Gateway and the area around FGCU. He gained name recognition in the Senate race that overlapped parts of the House district and also serves as vice chairman of Lee's Republican Party — a post he said he'll resign for the campaign.

Peacock, a Democrat, said about a month ago he plans to run for Lee County commission, but hadn't started campaigning. Running against his friend Thompson was never a possibility, Peacock said, but now that Thompson won't run, the House seat would be a good fit, especially given his legislative experience.

Peacock worked for former state Rep. Keith Arnold almost 14 years ago when Arnold represented that district. In the past few years, Peacock, who has a political consulting firm, lobbied in the state capital with groups such as the Florida Retail Association and the Florida Chamber of Commerce.

"I can hit the ground running," Peacock said.

Lee Memorial Hospital Board member Jason Moon, who was appointed this year by Gov. Charlie Crist, said he's thinking about running. But he said he has a young family, and conversations he's had with lawmakers about the time away from home show that demand can be a major issue.

"This is something my wife and I will have to talk about," he said.

Thompson was first elected to the House in 2000 and would have had four more years before he couldn't run again because of term limits. But Reese's decision to retire, which meant an open seat, pushed up his Tallahassee departure. "Who knows if there would have been an open seat if I stayed for another four years," Thompson said, adding that he would not oppose an incumbent judge.

The 20th Judicial Circuit covers five counties, and Thompson said he's worked in them all, either as a prosecutor or as an attorney in private practice. So far no other candidates have appeared.

Mann Jr. running

Frank Mann Jr. said Friday he's joining the race for Lee County judge, running for the seat held by

Rad Sturgis, who's retiring.

Mann, 47, is the son of the county commissioner with the same name. He ran for circuit judge three years ago and lost a run-off for the five-county circuit post. But the fact that he won the Lee County portion of the vote is encouraging, he said.

"I'll be reaching out to all the folks who helped me in that last race," Mann said. An attorney, Mann has worked for about five years as a Supreme Court certified mediator, a post he said requires him to look at both sides, much as a judge does, rather than being an advocate for one side.

Miguel Fernandez III and Robert Branning are also running for the same position.

Willing to move

Sonny Haas, a Republican candidate for the Lee County commission seat now held by Brian Bigelow, spoke at BUPAC (Businesspeople United for Political Action Committee) this week, and his down-home style resonated with some in the audience.

Haas, who ran unsuccessfully for commission two years ago against Commissioner Frank Mann, still pushes his experience as a firefighter and fire district board member in Lehigh Acres. Distinguishing between "needs" and "wants" is a theme for him, along with consolidating some public safety functions that are duplicative and expensive, and getting rid of red tape.

But his political efforts appear to be wearisome for his soon-to-be-ex-wife. Haas said he's in the midst of an amicable divorce caused in part by his persistence in pursuing public office.

"She knows I run around like a sprayed roach. ... I'll be working 72 hours a week" on the campaign and the office, which Haas said demands more than full-time attention and can't be treated as a part-time job.

That's a problem with some commissioners who don't work full days, he said, vowing to do things differently if he's elected.

Some audience members said they were confused by Haas' involvement in different commission races because commissioners must live in the district they represent. Haas said he does not live in the district he's running for now, but he will move there if elected, as the law allows.

"I hope I win and I can settle in Fort Myers," said Haas, a pool contractor who also has a retirement pension from his firefighter's work. "But I worry about buying something now and not winning."

Others in the race include Republican Dick Ripp, Democrat Debbie Jordan, and Cole Peacock, who's likely to switch to run for the state House.

Shell Factory event

Lizbeth Benacquisto, a Palm Beach County Republican candidate for the state Senate seat held by Sen. Dave Aronberg, D-Greenacres — who's running for Attorney General — has a fundraiser scheduled for Thursday at the Shell Factory in North Fort Myers.

The host committee of about 15 people for the two-hour event that starts at 5:30 p.m. includes Shell Factory owners Tom and Pam Cronin, along with Lee County Sheriff Mike Scott, Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton, Lee County Commissioner Tammy Hall, Rep. Trudi Williams, R-south Lee County, and former Fort Myers Police Chief Larry Hart. Others include Sawyer Smith, Bruce Strayhorn and Jenna Persons.

Judge has support

Miguel Fernandez III, a candidate for Lee County Judge, announced a campaign steering committee this week of about 50 people.

That's too many to list here, but members include Clerk of Courts Charlie Green; Israel Suarez from Nations Association; and Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah. Attorneys include Eric Feichthaler; Steve Carta, Wilbur Smith, Robert P. Henderson; Jeff Rice, Tom Chase, Theodore Tripp, Bruce Strayhorn, Joseph North, Kevin Jursinski, Jenna Persons, Marcus Viles and Vicki Sproat.
