

Parker on Politics: Florida House hopeful flush with cash

By **Betty Parker** • Special to news-press.com • April 10, 2010

1:10 A.M. — In what appears to be a record for Lee County campaigns, state House candidate Jason Moon reports almost \$100,000 in his first quarter of fundraising.

"I'm so excited and so humbled by the response," said Moon, 30, who faces a Republican primary with Matt Caldwell for the House seat now held by Rep. Nick Thompson, who's running for circuit judge.

Moon, 30, and an administrator with 21st Century Oncology — a business that operates in 13 states and is owned by his father-in-law — reported raising \$99,945, just short of six figures. Only a couple of elections ago raising that much money in the whole campaign for a Lee seat was considered remarkable.

Moon, who's said health care will be his major issue, tapped into the medical community and related businesses for most of the money. "I spent a lot of time on the phone for sure," he said, adding that he's also going door-to-door.

Some observers say the amount should be no surprise. Two years ago, Moon raised \$50,000 in a bid for the Lee Memorial Health System board; far more than the \$5,000 or so most candidates collect in that race. He lost, but was appointed to the board by Gov. Charlie Crist in September to fill a vacancy.

Moon said he'll need that much and more for

consultants and advertising to help get his message out, and he'll also walk precincts and meet voters personally at other events.

Although Caldwell's full report is not out yet, he said he's raised about \$12,000, and he questioned just how much money is needed to run in a district that's contained in Lee — other legislative districts take in parts of other counties — and has about 87,000 voters.

He's been going door to door for weeks, and said it's almost possible to meet every voter personally. Additionally, he said, he campaigned in much of the district two years ago during an unsuccessful state Senate bid, and has recognition and support from that.

Democrat Cole Peacock, who has no primary opposition, said he's raised about \$30,000. He'll meet the GOP primary winner in November.

Venue controversy

One of Moon's fundraisers has stirred debate related to how much he was charged to use a facility.

Of the few expenses on his report, the largest was \$750 to rent the Sidney and Berne Davis Cultural Center in downtown Fort Myers. The March 23 event had several co-hosts, including former mayor Jim Humphrey, who's an attorney for Lee Memorial's board, and Mayor Randy Henderson, elected in November.

The center, owned by the city and leased to the arts group for low rates, has basic contract rates of \$2,500 for an event of up to six hours; non-profit

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groups, such as those that provide community help and service, can pay \$2,500 for a full day. Other items and services, such as table and chairs, are available for additional payment.

Moon said he thought \$750 was high for his 90-minute event, but added that one of his mayoral hosts — Henderson said it was not he — arranged the venue, as is customary, and assured him it was a good rate. The campaign just paid the bill.

Jim Griffith, the center's director, said the fee was negotiated, and that different types of events can have different charges, as low as \$100 per hour. He wouldn't say who negotiated the fee.

Some community service, nonprofit groups that have had or planned events there, however, said they had to pay the figures on the contract, with no negotiation allowed.

The Boys and Girls' Club was among them. Even though the group was told it received a slight break in price — from \$2,500 to \$2,000 because their event followed another similar one — fees that were later added raised the cost to almost \$3,000, officials said.

"When you're trying to provide services to children in the community with serious needs, every dollar is precious," said club officer Marcia Davis. "It's disappointing because you think the city wants to bring people downtown. But their price makes it very difficult for nonprofits like us."

But Griffith said event costs can range beyond what's listed on the contract, depending on the event's details. "It has nothing to do with who the event is for or who's making the arrangements," he said.

Judge defends self

In the past, contentious races for a judgeship were confined to big cities. Even challenging a sitting judge in Lee was a rare event.

But things do change, and so do judicial races. Former Cape Coral Mayor Eric Feichthaler, who lost when he challenged the late commissioner Bob Janes two years ago, is trying again for elected office, this time running against incumbent Lee

Judge Archie Hayward.

Hayward was appointed to the post about two years ago, after going through a selection process first by the Judicial Nominating Commission, a panel of attorneys and legal experts who screen and short-list applicants for appointment to vacancies. The applicant list had 22 names; Hayward made the cut onto the short list, and was then interviewed by more legal experts in Tallahassee, a process that ended with his gubernatorial appointment.

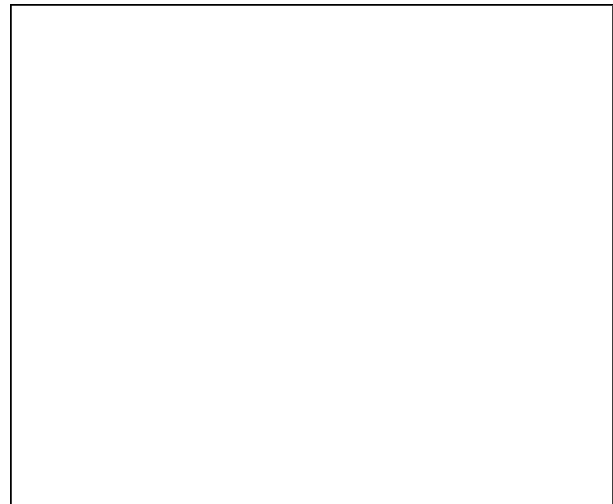
As one of the newer judges, and one who hasn't been through a full-fledged election, he could be seen as vulnerable for anyone looking for the job.

But Hayward, speaking to the Businesspeople United for Political Action Committee (BUPAC), said his experience not only on the bench, but in different kinds of law, is what separates him from his opponent. "I've got the trial experience and my experience across the board in varying kinds of law has been significant," said Hayward, a Fort Myers native and University of Florida graduate.

Judicial candidates are limited in what they can say during a campaign. Giving opinions on issues or on existing laws is forbidden; so are partisan politics. "As a judge, my duty is to enforce the law, regardless of how I feel about it," Hayward said.

Qualifications and experience are two key factors in these campaigns, he said. "That experience and the desire to help people is why I believe I'm a good judge," he said. "I've proven I can do the work."

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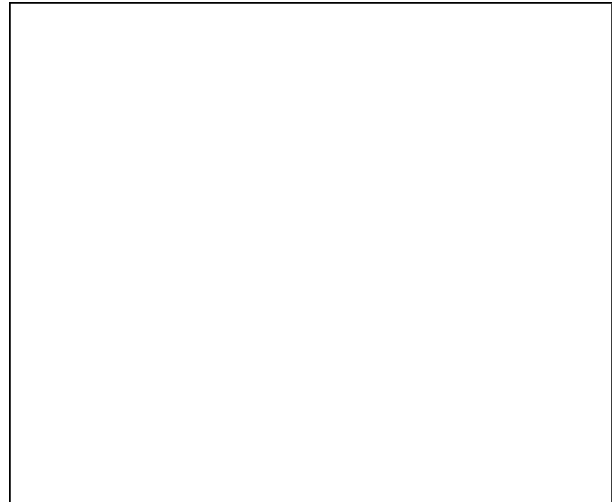


Someone who does not have that kind of experience will have quite a learning curve.”

He’s worked as a public defender and handled criminal cases during his time in private practice, he said.

Other cases included work with senior law and with those facing financial difficulties. Probate law and guardianship matters are also on his legal resume, and his community work includes programs that help with Alzheimer’s, the Boy Scouts and the Southwest Florida Community Foundation.

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