

Lee County Commissioner Frank Mann feeling heat over his ongoing support of Crist

Commissioner cites loyalty, helping Lee

Betty Parker • Parkerspolitics@aol.com • April 24, 2010

1:10 A.M. — No matter which label Gov. Charlie Crist runs under for the U.S. Senate race, one Republican official who says he's sticking by his long-time friend and ally is Lee County Commissioner Frank Mann, who's on Crist's Southwest Florida leadership team.

Mann cites two major points for the decision: personal loyalty, and the support and benefits given Lee from Crist as governor.

On the personal side, Mann said in the 20 years he's known and worked with Crist, even in offices the governor held earlier, Crist was supportive on issues Mann was involved with, especially on behalf of the developmentally disabled, environmental initiatives and crime.

Also, Mann said, he is "keenly aware that Lee County is the beneficiary of upward of \$100 million in federal stimulus money that was headed somewhere in the country, and we're very fortunate that a good share of it came here," providing at least 1,000 jobs that would not have existed otherwise. If Crist had not helped with that, Mann said, chances are Lee would not have fared so well.

"I find it very difficult to abandon a man whom I

have known as a friend and ally for 20 years, and as a leader who has been so very helpful to the county I love."

Mann said he "feels the heat" from others who no longer back Crist, including some who are seemingly driven by "one hug too many," Crist's "mili-second embrace" of President Obama in Fort Myers.

But, Mann said, he "does not plan to break my word to a man who has a long career of doing the right thing under pressure. ... My commitment was a personal obligation to a friend, and my word is my bond. This makes it awkward. But my word is still my word."

Kottkamp won't

Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp added his name this week to other Republican leaders who said they could not support Gov. Charlie Crist if he runs as an independent. Crist put Kottkamp in the number two post when he picked him as his running mate in the gubernatorial election, but relations between the two have deteriorated since then.

Kottkamp is now running for attorney general. As of the reporting period that ended last month, Kottkamp had outraised his two GOP primary opponents, but all three Republican candidates lag behind the two Democrats, who've been raising money a few months longer.

On the Republican side, Kottkamp - whose fundraising totals have gone up every quarter - has collected about \$590,500. Former legislator Holly Benson had \$401,200, and Tampa prosecutor Pam Bondi about \$422,000.

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For the Democratic candidates, state Sen. Dave Aronberg reports about \$915,300 in donations, and state Sen. Dan Gelber of Miami, about \$889,000 - with Aronberg out-raising Gelber in the last quarter.

Both Democrats had something of a disadvantage in the last quarter, however. As legislators, they are banned from fundraising during session, which started in March and made their quarter a month shorter.

None of the Republicans faced that prohibition and could raise money for the full three months.

Meek gains attention

While Republicans, especially in Tallahassee during the closing weeks of session, remain consumed with the U.S. Senate race and Gov. Charlie Crist's partisan status, Democratic U.S. Senate candidate U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek of Miami has gained more attention.

Many political pros believe the division among Republicans is most likely to benefit Meek, especially if Crist runs as a no-party candidate in the general election and divides the GOP even further.

The bad news for Meek is it's tough to gain media attention with the spotlight on the Republicans. His good news, though, is his campaign has made the most of it, sending out regular news releases touting Meek's attention to issues such as unemployment, the economy and education, while the GOP is consumed with credit card investigations and candidate attacks.

Most polls also place Meek in a favorable - not winning, but close - position against either Republican candidate Marco Rubio, who leads in the polls, or in a three-way race against Rubio and Crist.

And Meek just made history by becoming the first statewide candidate to qualify by petition, setting up an early network of organization. About 1,200 of those petition signatures came from Lee, Meek's campaign said, a number they're proud of from a GOP stronghold.

Meek will be in Fort Myers for a meet-and-greet May 1 at Nirvana Fusion restaurant on College Parkway in Fort Myers. Lee County Democratic officers are helping organize the event; a host committee is still being formed.

Caldwell committed

Matt Caldwell, a Republican running for state House, says he's committed to the House race despite efforts to persuade him to drop out.

Caldwell said he was approached about a week ago by someone with political connections in Tallahassee who suggested that if he dropped out, giving his GOP primary opponent Jason Moon a clear shot at the general election, Caldwell could be appointed to fill the Lee County Commission vacancy created by Bob Janes' death.

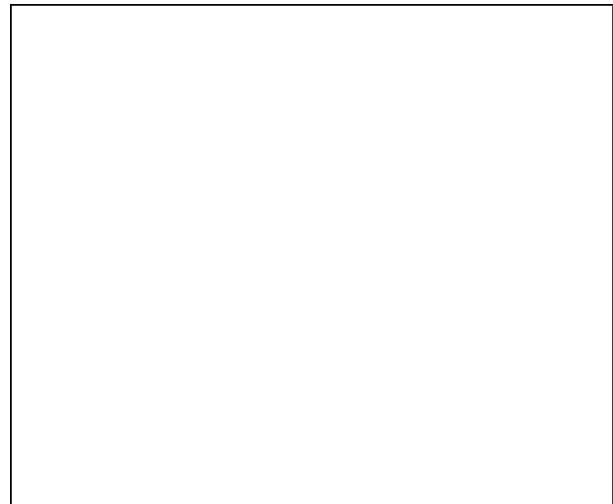
Caldwell refused.

"The whole thing is very distasteful to me," Caldwell said. "This is what gives politics a bad name."

For one thing, Caldwell said, such a move reeks of backroom politics, and would fly in the face of his leadership in efforts to create single-member districts for the commission. As a Lehigh Acres resident, Caldwell lives outside the district Janes represented.

Moon said he knew nothing about the offer, and would not have condoned such a suggestion if he'd

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been told about it.

Although Moon has raised about \$100,000, Caldwell believes voters will look at qualifications that go beyond money. After running unsuccessfully for another seat that includes much of the House district, Caldwell has some name recognition that relieves the need for so much advertising, and he believes his knowledge of the issues and work in the campaign provide other advantages.

Even without Caldwell, however, there's no assurance of escaping a GOP primary. John Schultz, a Fort Myers resident and Florida Highway Patrol trooper who's provided security for Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp, is expected to join the race for the District 73 seat as a Republican contender soon after session ends May 1.




Cole Peacock is running as the Democratic candidate.

- Betty Parker is a freelance writer specializing in politics. Her column runs on Saturdays.

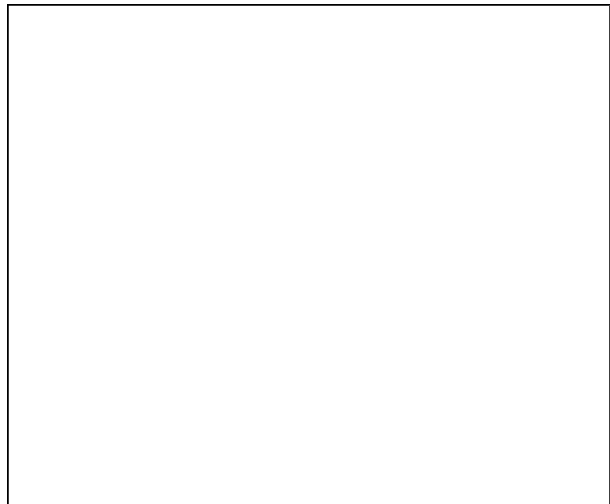


Frank Mann, Lee County Commissioner (news-press.com file photo)

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