

Betty Parker: GOP hopefuls share key players

House candidates, backers intertwined

Betty Parker • Parkerspolitics@aol.com • May 29, 2010

1:10 A.M. — With four Republican candidates facing off in the August primary, the state House District 73 race has attracted plenty of attention. But some Republican activists and interest groups eying the candidates and deciding who to support may find some of the usual signals confused.

Rarely has a field of candidates - Deanna Casalino, Matt Caldwell, Jason Moon and John Schultz - been so intertwined, or shared so many relationships between key players.

For example:

- Schultz, 40, who recently retired from his Florida Highway Patrol work providing security for Lt. Gov. Jeff Kottkamp, has Kottkamp's endorsement.
- Caldwell has the endorsement of Marco Rubio, the likely GOP nominee for U.S. Senate and party standard-bearer. Some Lee County party leaders who often follow Kottkamp's lead otherwise are also helping Caldwell.
- Kottkamp, who's running for attorney general, and Moon share the same political consultant.
- Schultz and Kottkamp have the same campaign treasurer.
- Schultz has gotten advice and introductions in Tallahassee from Jennifer Green, a manager with Liberty Consulting, a major-player advising and lobbying firm that's listed Moon as one of its lobbyists.
- Moon has had fundraising help from former U.S. Sen. Connie Mack IV, who's also a managing partner at Liberty.

When many groups and individuals that help raise support and money for campaigns decide who to back, they consider the full package - not just the

candidate, but key supporters, consultants and entire team. But when past alliances seem scattered, and there's little indication yet from legislative leadership about their choices, it's left some potential players falling back on the question of "who's on first?" in this Republican primary.

Looking ahead, Schultz has a "campaign kick-off" meet-and-greet scheduled 1-2:30 p.m. June 5 at The Edison restaurant. That follows a fundraiser he held in Tallahassee a couple weeks ago, which he said was more of a farewell party with friends he made while working there.

McCollum fights

Republican gubernatorial candidate Rick Scott got a head start on primary rival Bill McCollum, but the TV ad wars are now playing in earnest.

The latest entry comes from ads attacking Scott, who made millions as head of Columbia/HCA health care corporation.

He left the company before it had to pay more than a billion dollars in Medicare fraud fines and he was never charged. But he was in charge during the time involved in the investigation.

The ads focus on that story and Scott's leadership; they're funded by a group called Alliance for America's future, based in Virginia and with ties to McCollum's consultants.

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Because of the way the group, known as a 527, is organized, full disclosure of donors and other details is less available than for other groups such as political action committees. The group is reportedly spending about \$1 million to show the ad.

McCollum's campaign also has brought out former Gov. Jeb Bush in an ad supporting McCollum, another buy close to \$1 million.

Meanwhile, Scott has gone after McCollum's convoluted positions on immigration, something McCollum has revised a few times.

McCollum's earlier position, used in the ad, was more in opposition to the Arizona law. Since then, McCollum has been more supportive of the law, a change that earned him a "flip-flop" rating from PolitiFact, a nonpartisan group that evaluates politicians' claims.

And McCollum also took a hit from the conservative "RedState" website. While the writer doesn't exactly take sides - saying both McCollum and Scott have details in their background that are ripe for examination - he faults McCollum for letting Scott develop his platform so far without a response.

"McCollum wouldn't be having this problem at all if his campaign weren't so lackluster with a sense of entitlement," the writer said. "That's part of the problem Charlie Crist ran into, and look what happened to him."

East, West coast

The race for Sen. Dave Aronberg's Senate District 27 seat has Democrats Pete Burkert and Kevin Rader campaigning mostly on the Democrat-rich east coast, and Republicans Sharon Merchant and LizBeth Benacquisto on the GOP-heavy west coast.

We may not see the Democrats much, but Burkert is pushing hard on Rader's legislative votes that allow the insurance industry - Rader is an agent - greater ability to raise homeowners' rates.

Rader, meanwhile, is confident his home base in Palm Beach County will give him the primary win.

On this coast, Merchant gained enough signatures

to qualify by petition, an effort that pays off in helping build name ID and organization.

She's also had help with fundraising events from community leaders including Jim Dozier, Glee Duff, Charlotte County Sheriff Bill Cameron, Greg Jones, Doug Stevens, and Mike and Lauren Hagan.

Benacquisto, meanwhile, has a cooking class and wine tasting fundraiser event lined up at Cru on June 16. The all-female host list includes Liz Kagan, Gail Markham, Deborah Liftig, Tina Matte and Jenna Persons.

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

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