

Politics 2010: Choosing elected leaders in Lee and Collier just a part of the debate

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The election year ahead in Collier and Lee counties could be as much about how local government is structured as it is about who wins the County Commission seats.

In Collier County, two of the five commission seats are up for election. But against that backdrop, a key issue is who will run the fire districts and whether there will be a fall referendum on the matter.

Likewise in Lee County, two of the five commission seats are up for election. But there is a related issue headed to referendum on whether commissioners are chosen by all Lee voters or individually by districts.

Here's what's ahead in 2010 for county government elections:

Collier County

It may look like Collier County residents are heading into a low-key political year, but what appears – or doesn't – on the November 2010 ballot should keep everyone hopping. As should the August 2010 primary.

As of now, one or both of the two Collier County Commission races could be decided Aug. 24, since so far all of the candidates are Republicans. And, there is the possibility of a Nov. 2 referendum on fire district consolidation.

Members of the League of Women Voters of Collier County are primarily watching the consolidation issue and the commission races, president Sandy Parker said.

With the blessings of the Southwest Florida legislative delegation, state Rep. Matt Hudson, R-Naples, who is up for re-election, proposed two pieces of draft legislation that would enable the county's fire districts to merge.

It will be up to other state-elected officials to decide if they want to give Collier voters the right to determine their own fate. Local bills rarely are opposed by legislators from other counties, but fire district consolidation faces opposition by the Collier County Commission, state Rep. Tom Grady, R-Naples, who is up for re-election, and state Sen. Garrett Richter, R-Naples.

Hudson said he hopes all parties will reconsider their opposition, since it rested on a clause that since has been removed from the draft legislation.

Views on consolidation also could affect the outcome of the commission races.

Collier Commissioner Frank Halas announced Nov. 1 that he won't seek re-election. Lined up for his District 2 seat so far are community volunteer Gina Downs, attorney Joe Foster and attorney Georgia Hiller. All three are Republicans.

Incumbent Commissioner Fred Coyle is seeking another term of office, but faces a challenger in nurse Lavigne (pronounced La-VINE) Kirkpatrick, who is the marketing director for Avow Hospice.

Both Coyle and Kirkpatrick are Republicans.

Barring any major rewrites during the legislative process, the consolidation issue can only go to a referendum if two conditions are met.

First, state legislators must approve two bills: one enabling rural fire districts to merge, and one allowing urban fire districts to merge. This will set the stage so that the rural and urban districts then can decide whether to merge. The initial merger would resolve some staffing and payroll inconsistencies.

The second condition necessary for the issue to appear on the ballot is a vote by fire district commissioners.

For example, suppose North Naples fire-rescue district leaders decide they want to merge with Golden Gate fire-rescue and East Naples fire-rescue. If North Naples fire leaders and East Naples fire leaders elect to proceed, but Golden Gate leaders decide against it, only North Naples and East Naples voters would get to weigh in on consolidation.

"It would be unfair, otherwise, since residents that wouldn't be impacted could have a say in the outcome," said attorney Laura Donaldson, who drafted the bills.

Another possible ballot issue for Collier voters could be a vote to move to charter government.

"We are not aware that anything is happening here but we are keeping an eye on it just in case," Parker said.

Lee County

Who sits in two Lee County Commission chairs and how it's decided are both headed to the 2010 ballot.

Lee County commissioners currently must live within districts but are elected by countywide vote. The concept of single-member districts, in which commissioners would be elected only by those voters from within their districts, has been hotly debated for decades.

Come Nov. 2, that change could finally be made. Commissioner Bob Janes announced in November he had changed his mind and would vote to put the issue on the ballot.

Janes said he'd opposed previous single-member proposals because they also envisioned an expanded commission in which two at-large commissioners would join five elected by district.

If voters approve the new approach, the first election affected would be 2012. Janes' term is up that year, but he's already said he will not seek re-election.

"I say, 'Let the people decide,'" he said. "I'm not particularly in favor of it, but I'm certainly willing to let the people have a choice."

Voters also will be choosing two county commissioners this fall.

Commissioner Tammy Hall is so far unchallenged as she seeks another term in District 4, but Commissioner Brian Bigelow faces opponents both within his Republican Party and from Democrats.

Bigelow so far is facing two potential opponents in the party primary on Aug. 24, with North Fort Myers fire engineer Sonny Haas and Fort Myers businessman and former School Board member Dick Ripp seeking the nomination.

On the other side of that same ballot could be two Democrats. Cole Peacock, former director of corporate relations for Chico's, and Deborah Jordan, managing partner of Hogbody's Bar and Grill in Cape Coral and a state board member of the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association, will square off for the Democratic spot on the fall ballot.

"It looks like we're going to have two healthy primary matches," Bigelow said.

Bigelow said he'd be interested in the Democratic side, but is "singularly focused" on his own race.

The 2010 elections might be the last of their kind. In a recent memo, County Attorney David Owen recommends commissioners hold a public hearing on the ballot question before June 1. Commissioners would have to adopt an ordinance stating the ballot question and get it to Supervisor of Elections Sharon Harrington by around July 1.

"I need to have it as early as I can," Harrington said. "July 1 is plenty of time with it going on in November."

Changing the system would mean more ballot styles in future elections, increasing costs, Harrington said. But ballots would be changing anyway.

The ordinance on single-member districts would go into effect Jan. 1, 2011, meaning the first election held that way would be in 2012. Any district changes driven by the 2010 Census would go into effect then, too.

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Editor's note:

This is the last in a series that looks ahead at elections and issues that will dominate politics in 2010.

Part one: The state

Part two: Cities

Part three: School Boards

Today: Counties



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