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Three seek nod to square off with Hackel in November

By Chad Selweski, The Macomb Daily

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As Democratic County Executive Mark Hackel prepares to run for re-election, he waits the outcome of a three-person Republican primary to determine his GOP challenger.

The Aug. 5 Republican contest remains a low-key affair as Randell Shafer and Erin Stahl, both of St. Clair Shores, and David Novak of Chesterfield Township vie for the GOP crown.

All three candidates are tacking to the right of Hackel, who prides himself as a bipartisan standard bearer for the county. The upcoming elections will provide voters with their first opportunity to cast judgment on the charter they approved that was intended to establish a balance of powers between an executive branch of government and a legislative branch, the

Board of Commissioners.

Novak, 47, has a long track record in the business world, first in retail and now as an account executive for a defense firm.

His one prior foray into politics, as a 2010 candidate for state representative, resulted in a frustrating, 64-vote loss to now-State Rep. Andrea LaFontaine.

Shafer could not be reached for comment about his candidacy.

At the same time, Novak and Stahl disagree with Hackel on a number of fronts.

Novak is skeptical of the Hackel administration's plan for a \$300 million municipal bond sale to eliminate the county's massive debt for promised retiree health care benefits and to fund long-anticipated improvements to county buildings in downtown Mount Clemens, the county seat.

Novak suggests that shelved plans to replace the crumbling county jail, at an estimated cost of up to \$200 million, should be attached to a large package of bond issues that would deal with infrastructure improvements and retiree health care deficits.

"Unfortunately, I would need a lot more information before I could make a decision," said Novak, who is viewed by some political observers as the frontrunner in the primary contest. "We need to pretty much be putting everything into one large bucket."

In contrast, Stahl, a one-term St. Clair Shores councilwoman, said she believes that county should not take on any more debt. Safer methods exist, she said, to finance building improvements.

In addition, Stahl recalled that her municipal experience in reducing employee pension costs demonstrated that \$250,000 could be cut from the St. Clair Shores ledger. The county's long-term retiree health care debt is pegged at about \$270 million.

Stahl was a Republican who switched to the Libertarian Party and is now back with the GOP. A consultant, Stahl emphasizes her master's degree in finance.

In 2010, she failed in her Libertarian candidacy for Macomb's first county executive, garnering less than 5 percent of the vote.

As for her 2003-07 stint on the St. Clair Shores City Council, Stahl now says that her experience "gave me an eye-opening, earth-shattering wealth of knowledge and experience on how government really operates."

On the issues, Stahl said she opposes the suburbs' attempt during the Detroit bankruptcy process to negotiate a lease of the city's water/sewer department. Those plans, which have so far produced rocky results, would put the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, or DWSD, under the control of a tri-county water authority.

Stahl said her experiences with the Shores' Tax Increment Financing Authority, or TIFA, makes her leery of all government authorities. The TIFA board, she said, operated in the shadows and largely ignored public input.

Efforts by regional officials to take the massive sewer/water system out of the hands of Detroit officials are supported by Novak. But he prefers putting the DWSD's day-to-day operations under private sector control.

The widespread transfer by many municipal garbage collections to private companies shows the value of privatizing public services, he said. Novak said he would require bidders for the DWSD contract to limit annual water rate increases to 4 percent.

As for the Macomb County Blue Water Economy that Hackel touts at every opportunity, Stahl and Novak are, to varying degrees, skeptical of the county exec's hopes of wooing hotels to the Lake St. Clair shoreline and creating new attractions such as large piers.

Novak, a frequent jet-skier on the lake, said he needs to study the issue further. He believes all economic developments in the waterfront communities will benefit the shoreline.

"I think (Hackel) has Macomb's best interests at heart, but I don't agree with his marketing approach," he said, adding that an upscale shopping mall planned for a large site at I-94 and Hall Road (Rosso Highway) can generate a major impact.

In contrast, Stahl opposes any county role in attracting major developments, such as hotels, to the lakefront.

"My city has been toying with the idea of a hotel but nobody has jumped up and done it – because it is not a viable project," she said. "... It makes no sense to waste money this way if businesses are not going to fully bear the risk of (a) costly project without any subsidies (or) citizen tax dollars."

Another area of division between Novak and Stahl is the upcoming November ballot proposal that let's voters decide if they want to re-open the county charter to revisions and create a new charter commission.

The charter approved by voters in 2009 includes a provision requiring a 2014 vote to allow amendments and the election of a new charter commission.

Novak said he would study the issue after the August primary and reach a decision. For now, he is leaning toward the status quo and a "no" vote on the proposal.

Stahl favors the proposal and the opportunity to open the charter for changes. But she favors an overhaul, casting aside the "home rule" charter in favor of adherence to a state law that allows for a county executive and a "stronger" Board of Commissioners.

That is the system that prevails in Oakland County government. But it's unclear if the November measure can legally create such a dramatic turn.

The two candidates also have divergent views on the performance of Hackel, a Macomb Township Democrat, in his first term as he tries to make ties with the Republican Party, particularly Gov. Rick Snyder.

Grading the incumbent on a scale of 1-10 (10 being the best) Novak said he would give the exec a 6. Hackel's lack of diplomatic relations with the county board in the first two years of his reign -- when he displayed a "kingdom atmosphere" -- exhibited the incumbent's greatest weakness, he said.

Stahl is more particular in ranking her potential November opponent. Her Hackel report card: personality, charisma, speaking ability, 10; public relations team, 10; working with commissioners, 2; financial team of advisors, 1.

Overall, Novak asserts that his business background separates his candidacy from Stahl and Shafer.

"I've been working in business for 20 years," he said. "And I have a wide variety of experience, from financial to human resources to an operational background.

If she wins the primary and is elected in November, Stahl said she would rely upon divine inspiration to help her accomplish the Macomb County CEO job.

"I'm just following God's path and he seems to give the right dose of strength and courage," she said, "the right tools, skills, knowledge and people when I need it to be the voice of the citizens and expose and fix the wrong doing by government employees and officials."

Shafer, the 2010 GOP nominee, lost to Hackel by landslide proportions and was also defeated by big margins in his two congressional runs against U.S. Rep. Sander Levin in 2004 and 2006.

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