

Times West Virginian April 13, 2008

Ex-broadcaster and two legislators among Secretary of State candidates

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CHARLESTON— Updating campaign finance laws, improving voter turnout and changing the way polling places are run are some of the ideas from those wanting to become West Virginia's next Secretary of State.

Unlike the 2004 primary when a large group of candidates sought to take over for Joe Manchin after he ran for governor, only three Democrats and one Republican are running in the May 13 primaries. They are seeking to replace Republican incumbent Betty Ireland, who decided not to seek a second four-year term.

Former television broadcaster Natalie Tennant is up against two Statehouse veterans — House Majority Leader Joe DeLong, D-Hancock, and Senate Majority Whip Billy Wayne Bailey, D-Wyoming. Republican Charles Minimah is unopposed in the primary.

The Secretary of State's office oversees elections, registers businesses and maintains state records, but the candidates see it as potentially more than that. Bailey said the office could be a solid link between charitable organizations and people in need.

"I think the Secretary of State's office

is the doorway into government for many, many people," Bailey said.

Minimah, a Charleston businessman, said his main mission is to get voters' attention.

"This election is to empower the people to think and work towards growth and prosperity and not just sit around and complain," he said. "If the people don't get involved, the problem still remains."

It's been 19 years since voters rejected a ballot measure that would have eliminated the elective posts of secretary of state, agricultural commissioner and state treasurer. With state finances remaining tight and the Legislature looking for ways to cover debts, the candidates say the office is still important and should remain a separate entity.

"The Secretary of State's office has always been known as the people's office," DeLong said.

He wants the office's powers expanded to investigate corporate fraud and non-profit organizations, particular those that receive public funds, and expand an e-government movement that allows residents to conduct state business by computer.

"That type of 24-hour-a-day, 7-day-a-week access is very important to businesses in terms of expanding growth in this state," he said.

Tennant would like to expand a program implemented last year that uses an electronic method to sign official documents without having to physically print off, sign and mail them to state agencies.

Tennant and DeLong have West Virginia University in common — Tennant was the university's Mountaineer mascot in her college days, while DeLong was an offensive lineman on the football team from 1991-95 — but some of their ideas are far different.

Tennant, a Charleston resident, signed the state's voluntary code of fair campaign practices, which limits spending for Secretary of State primary campaigns to \$150,000 per candidate. The code also limits candidates to \$150,000 in the general.

DeLong and Bailey said the \$150,000 is not enough and outdated. Bailey said the \$1,000 limit on individual contributions in state campaign law needed to be adjusted higher for inflation. He suggested that it be raised to correspond to federal contribution limits. According to the Federal Election Commission, individuals can contribute up to \$2,300 per election.

Tennant didn't oppose a review of the voluntary code, but she and DeLong said the posting of free video messages from candidates on the Secretary of State's Web site are a way to keep campaign costs down.

DeLong's campaign has raised more than \$231,878, seven times more

than any other candidate.

"We can't get ourselves into a position that the person with the most name recognition wins," DeLong said.

Tennant interrupted him.

"I don't think the person with the most money should win, too," she said. "There shouldn't be a race that's based on money."

Or an office rich in handouts. All four candidates agreed the Secretary of State should limit the office's distribution of taxpayer-funded trinkets.

In 2005, Ireland's name was on more than 250 coffee mugs distributed to county clerks and election workers at a cost of \$1,763. A year earlier, Attorney General Darrell McGraw drew criticism after his staff ordered more than \$100,000 in trinkets featuring his name.

Other elected officials across the state have been criticized for painting their names on state or county vehicles.

Building the voter database and fighting voter apathy was high on every candidate's to-do list.

Voter turnout in the May primaries was 26 percent in 2006, 39 percent in 2004 — a presidential election year — and 32 percent in 2002.

"There is so much apathy among the electorate. We have got to start kindling the fire," Bailey said. "If that

means even going to kindergarten and instilling in our children's heart and soul that voting is not only a right but it's a duty, then that's what we need to do."

Tennant sees hiring representatives of civic groups such as Lions Clubs and Little Leagues as a way to overcome a shortage of poll workers and raise money for those groups.

Fair and clean elections, including voter confidence, have been a top issue for Tennant.

In her narrow loss to Ken Hechler in the 2004 primary, nearly 3,000 votes in several counties were tossed because of improperly formatted

ballots. The Legislature amended state election law last year to address the formatting errors.

The candidates favor allowing counties to choose the type of ballots used in elections instead of forcing modernization with high-tech voting machines, which nationally have been criticized over concerns about vote fraud and election tampering.

Currently 34 counties use touch-screen machines for voting and 19 more use OpticScan machines that tally votes in a manner similar to standardized tests. Two counties — Braxton and Wyoming — still use paper ballots.