

Who Should Be the Most Powerful Politician in Rock Island County?

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Tuesday, 24 February 2004 18:00

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In the hierarchy of county politics, the state's attorney's office is at the very top. The police can investigate a crime and make an arrest, but if the state's attorney chooses not to prosecute, the accused goes free. The state's attorney makes life-and-death decisions with capital crimes, and critical decisions with less serious cases, such as whether to charge something as a felony or a misdemeanor.

So with Marshall Douglas retiring after 16 years as Rock Island County state's attorney, it's no surprise that five Democrats are seeking his position in the March 16 primary election. (As is typical in Rock Island County, there is no Republican candidate.)

Four of the five candidates have experience in the prosecutor's office, and two are presently assistant state's attorneys. Most of the candidates have ideas about how to combat scams that target senior citizens (such as home-repair fraud), but their agendas and qualifications give voters a wide range to choose from.

The *River Cities' Reader* held face-to-face interviews with four of the candidates; the interview with Jeff Terronez was by phone.

The state's attorney is the county's chief legal officer. The office has a \$1.3-million budget and approximately 15 assistant state's attorneys who prosecute cases and also defend the county against lawsuits. The position has a four-year term, no term limit, and a state-set salary that's currently \$137,850.

For more information on the election, visit (<http://ricoclerk.revealed.net>).

Geoffrey P. Campbell

Background

Age 43. Married, two children. Law degree from Southern Illinois University School of Law.

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Currently assistant public defender in Knox County. Worked in the Rock Island County state's attorney's office for more than a year starting in 1994, prosecuting drug cases. Campbell has represented two death-penalty defendants; one is serving a 50-year sentence following a conviction, and the other agreed to a plea bargain.

Agenda

- Pledges to prosecute certain types of cases, such as retail theft and obstructing justice (in situations when somebody gives a false name in a traffic stop), as felonies that are currently being charged as misdemeanors. In Henry and Knox counties, he said, assistant state's attorneys assigned to felony cases average 200 cases per attorney per year. In Rock Island County, eight felony attorneys prosecute a total of between 1,100 and 1,200 cases a year. "It's embarrassing," he said. "The staffing level is fine. They just need to work."
- Promises to personally prosecute state drug-dealer cases.
- Hopes to coordinate drug-enforcement efforts among area jurisdictions such as Scott County.
- Plans to re-visit the issue of a judicial-circuit-wide juvenile-detention center. Presently, he said, the county spends \$100 a day sending juvenile offenders to an out-of-area detention center, and as a result the decision is based more on economics than what's good for the community or the juvenile.
- Says he will dictate guideline penalty targets for certain offenses, and assistant state's attorneys will discuss the cases with him when they deviate. "This is my way, and I'm the boss," he said.
- Promises that the attorney-on-call will return phone calls from police officers within half an hour.

Discussion

Campbell is the rabble-rouser in this race, bringing a "destroy the enemy" attitude from his experience in the military. (He was a former U.S. Army infantryman.) He claims that he will demand that assistant state's attorneys be willing to go to trial and not make errors that will result in convictions being set aside. "I don't know how many would want to stay with me," he said. "They have a very strong base, ... [but] there may be some that are afraid of trial." He also said that "the attorneys are going to be accountable. Weaker attorneys will go to the misdemeanor division."

Campbell also claims that his experience as a commander of a 150-person unit in the National Guard has prepared him for the administrative duties of the state's attorney's office.

He said that opponent Herbert F. Schultz Jr.'s pledge to personally review all felony cases is "ignorance. That's micromanaging. You have to leave the assistants some leeway."

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Will Kalinak

Background

Age 49. Married, no children. Law degree from Illinois Institute of Technology Chicago-Kent College of Law.

Assistant state's attorney in Rock Island County for the past 15 years.

Agenda

- Plans to "bring in the next generation of crime-prevention programs" that reduce costs and recidivism in areas such as petty theft, bad checks, child support, and first-offense domestic violence. For example, the domestic-violence program would allow approved first offenders to avoid a conviction by participating in an intensive counseling program that they pay for and completing a probationary period with no further incidents. Many of these programs are public-private partnerships, he said.
- Pledges to use public-service announcements to alert the public about issues such as assaults on teachers and home-repair fraud. "I think I would be the candidate most concerned with crime prevention," he said. He added that "people don't know their rights," particularly in terms of home-repair fraud.
- Would give senior assistant state's attorneys more control over the way cases are processed. This would create a "mentoring" system for less-experienced attorneys, and all felonies would be reviewed either by the state's attorney or a senior assistant state's attorney. Kalinak said this would result in more jail time, more prison time, longer probation, and more trials.
- Promises to create a policy manual to increase professionalism in the office. Kalinak said the office doesn't presently have a manual.
- Plans to create a Web site for the state's attorney's office – the office does not have one – modeled after one in St. Clair, County, Illinois (<http://www.sao.co.st-clair.il.us>).

Discussion

Kalinak is mostly a stay-the-course candidate, saying that "I think the office is in pretty good shape, and it doesn't need a radical overhaul." He did say the office needs to have more interaction with the community and crime-prevention efforts.

"I know how to do every single job in that office," Kalinak said, and he has more than a decade more experience in the state's attorney office than any other candidate. Kalinak has also received training in State's Attorney's Office Executive Management & Administration.

Kalinak said fears expressed by opponent Herbert F. Schultz Jr. that sex offenders are

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currently getting only probation are “unfounded.”

The candidate said he would carry a full caseload from “top to bottom. ... Everybody’s equal up there.” He also said that he would “make the office more accessible.” Unlike opponent Schultz, however, he doesn’t promise that citizens could walk in at any time during business hours and see an attorney.

Kalinak added that he would be more of a hands-off administrator, “hiring really good people and letting them do their jobs.” He would use a “goal-oriented management system” in which each assistant state’s attorney would be reviewed annually.

Sharon Pulsifer

Background

Age 58. Divorced, four children. Law degree from University of Illinois College of Law.

Attorney in private practice in Rock Island County for 24 years. Pulsifer has served as Guardian ad Litem – representing the interests of children who have allegedly been abused or neglected – in Rock Island County for more than a decade.

Agenda

- Pledges to focus on fraud against seniors through a special task force, education, and prosecution.
- Plans to more aggressively prosecute abuse and neglect of children and domestic abuse.
- Claims the county needs a juvenile detention center.
- Says that the state’s attorney’s office needs to work more closely with community agencies to find remedies in cases that might warrant something less severe than prosecution. For example, some families might be good candidates for social services more than the state child-welfare system through the Department of Children & Family Services.
- Promises to “bring the office into the 21st Century” by increasing the use of computers and establishing a Web site for the state’s attorney’s office.
- Plans to make the office more “consumer-friendly” with an open-door policy.

Discussion

Pulsifer said that she has more experience practicing law than the other candidates.

Yet Pulsifer is the most vague among candidates about her agenda. She said she views the state’s attorney’s office as a challenge and a way to give back to the community.

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But she did take issue with the “zero tolerance” policy advocated by opponent Herbert F. Schultz Jr. “If you’re going to say, ‘I won’t give probation,’ you’re essentially saying you’re not going to plea bargain. It’s unrealistic.” That type of attitude will result in people going free – because of acquittals at trial – when they could have had convictions through plea-bargaining, she said.

Pulsifer said that running her own law office since 1987 gives her the administrative experience necessary to run the state’s attorney’s office. Furthermore, she said that never being a prosecutor shouldn’t be considered a strike against her. “It’s not that difficult to go from one side of the table to the other,” she said.

Herbert F. Schultz Jr.

Background

Age 44. Married, two children. Law degree from Thomas M. Cooley Law School.

Currently in private practice but has served in both the Rock Island state’s attorney’s office (for two years) and the office of the Illinois attorney general (for more than two years).

Agenda

- Pledges to personally review all felony cases and set a sentencing target. If that target can’t be reached through a plea bargain, a case will go to trial.
- Promises to establish a consumer-fraud program that would include a consumer hotline and lawyers trained in consumer fraud. Schultz believes that attorneys can be shifted from other areas to cover this caseload. “I don’t think it’s going to cost the county anything beyond existing salaries,” he said. “I don’t think by any means they [assistant state’s attorneys] are overworked.”
- Plans to establish “community prosecution” program that would get prosecutors out into the community. The program would encourage the state’s attorney’s office to understand and prosecute “quality of life” nuisance crimes – such as noise and dumping.
- Plans to exclusively use in-house attorneys to defend the county against lawsuits. In 2003, Schultz said, the county spent \$60,000 on outside legal services.
- Promises that sex offenders, particularly those who victimize children, will receive either jail or prison time. Schultz claims that one-third of sex offenders currently receive probation without jail or prison time.

Discussion

Schultz is the candidate who most obviously approaches this race with a politician’s mindset. He targets hot-button issues – sexual abuse of children and frauds exploiting seniors – and

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views the position as the public face of law enforcement in court.

“I have the most diverse experience of the candidates,” he said. Although he has been in private practice for more than a decade, he said, “If you’re going to be a good football coach, you have to know both offense and defense.”

Schultz notes that the state’s attorney is the “most powerful person in the county” and promises to personally prosecute major cases. “You can have anybody be a good administrator,” he said. When the state’s attorney is in court on a case, “these jurors think, ‘This is an important case.’ ... People want to see the person they elect.”

Jeff Terronez

Background

Age 32. Married, one child. Law degree from Valparaiso University School of Law.

Assistant state’s attorney for the past six years.

Agenda

Running on a victims’ platform that includes:

- Ensuring that victims are notified by the state’s attorney’s office when offenders are released. This is not presently being done, he said.
- Following up to ensure that restitution is paid to victims. “Quite often our office doesn’t follow up with that,” Terronez said. Offenders ordered to pay restitution often return to court and claim they can’t pay. “We need to re-focus on taking away their excuses for not paying.”
- Making sure victims understand that they have a right to address the court. “I don’t know if it’s not clear to them now,” he said, “but it’s not happening now.”

Terronez said that while some of his opponents are pledging to be tough on certain crimes, a victim-focused attitude “encompasses every type of policy and crime that’s out there.”

- The candidate also said he would personally handle all felony preliminary hearings, to understand which cases need special attention from the office. This would also be a way to ensure consistency in the types of sentences the state’s attorney’s office is seeking. “Every case has to be judged on its own merits,” he said.
- On the civil side of the state’s attorney’s job, Terronez was vague, saying that he would work to ensure that there is no animosity between the state’s attorney’s office and the county board or other county departments.

Discussion

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Terronez is the youngest candidate, but he has more prosecutorial experience than all his opponents except Will Kalinak, and he's received the endorsement of the Rock Island and Milan police unions and politicians such as U.S. Representative Lane Evans and state Senator Denny Jacobs. Some of those endorsements are Terronez's best response to the argument that he can't match opponents' managerial backgrounds. "They understand that I have the ability to lead," he said of the unions. "Leadership ability is in the eye of the beholder." Terronez's victims' rights platform also makes him stand out in this crowd.

Like several other candidates, Terronez criticized the "zero tolerance" pledge of Herbert F. Schultz Jr. but added a different twist. He noted that offenders who get jail time might be done with their sentences in six months, but those who get probation would have a "hammer over their head" for much longer. Probation also makes it easy for the court system to monitor offenders.