

What Choice?

Written by Jeff Ignatius

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In elections, candidates for less-prominent offices typically ride the coattails of the people at the top of the ticket. That assumes, of course, that there are candidates to get pulled along. In Rock Island County, there aren't.

Of 26 races on the ballot in the county, the Republican party has candidates in only eight – and that includes presidential nominee George W. Bush and three judicial candidates. State Senator Denny Jacobs and Representatives Joel Brunsvold and Mike Boland, all Democrats, are running unopposed for at least the second straight time. No Republicans are running for five countywide offices. And of 13 county-board seats up for election, the Republican party is fielding three candidates.

“We didn't have much of an organization,” admitted Rock Island County Republican Chairperson Tom Getz, who took the post in April. “We're rebuilding from the grass roots.”

When Getz came aboard, only 37 of 120 precinct-committeeperson positions were filled. Getz has built that number to more than 80.

Previous party leaders worked hard, Getz said, “but it was just not very broad-based.”

“They've really had no spark,” said John Gianulis, chairperson of the county's Democratic Party since 1968. Back then, Democrats felt a lot like Republicans do today: lonely. The GOP controlled the county board, a lot of countywide offices, and the local seats in the state legislature. In 1958, when running for a party position, “I was one of only a few Democrats filing for office,” he said.

The Democrats turned it around, though. “We have been dominating since the middle '70s,” Gianulis said. “It just takes a lot of work. You can't be a country-club chairman.” He added that it's just as important to have candidates for county office as it is to have people at the top of the ballot.

Getz understands that and worked to get a third Republican county-board candidate. When he

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became chairperson, after the primary, only two GOP candidates were running for county board. He convinced Ralph Erikson to run, and he was nominated at the organization's convention.

Admittedly, being a Republican candidate in Rock Island County has not been an easy task in the past few years. In 1996 and 1998, incumbent U.S. Representative Lane Evans beat Republican challenger Mark Baker by trouncing him in Rock Island County. In 1998, Evans won by 6,056 votes out of 194,200 cast; in Rock Island County, he won by 9,861 ballots.

And it's not just Evans. In 1996, Rock Island County straight-ticket Democratic voters outnumbered Republicans 21,982 to 9,350.

Getz said it can be hard to recruit candidates against those kind of odds. "There was a frustration," he said; people were unwilling to run just to get creamed by the Democratic candidate.

While such Democratic dominance makes election years less stressful, it also makes them more boring, Gianulis said. "It was fun" when both parties fielded full slates of candidates, he said. "We really enjoyed it. We had the enemy identified and we went after them."

That the Democratic party dominates in largely blue-collar Rock Island County isn't much of a surprise, given the strength of organized labor. What is shocking is that Republicans appear to be so apathetic about it.

"We've got a lot of work to do," Getz said. "We're making progress. I'm just trying to get more people involved."

He needs to hurry. After the November 7 election, he must round up a new set of candidates for township and city elections next year. The filing deadline is in mid-December.

For now, though, Getz is focusing on next week's election. "I wish we had a dozen more county-board candidates," he said.