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NORTH PORT

Mayor shakes up North Port election

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In a major shakeup in the City Commission election, North Port Mayor Jacqueline Moore said Friday that she will resign in November, halfway through her four-year term, so that she can seek election this fall to the District 2 commission seat.

It is a calculated risk for Moore, who will be opposed by at least three candidates, including incumbent Cheryl Cook. Moore said she will resign from the commission on Nov. 8, the date of the general election. But to reach the general election, Moore must finish in the top two candidates in the Aug. 30 primary.

According to North Port's city charter, commissioners must call a special election to choose Moore's replacement for the remainder of her term, which ends in November 2018. City Attorney Mark Moriarty said commissioners will discuss at their next regular meeting, June 14, when to have the special election.

"There's going to basically be two choices: Do they want to instruct (Sarasota County Supervisor of Elections) Kathy Dent to have a ballot for Seat 4 on the November election? The downside to that is it leaves people very little time to qualify," Moriarty said. "The other option is to wait until the seat is actually vacant before calling a special election, and there would be another election after the general election in November."

Moore's decision generated sharp reaction from fellow commissioners Cook and Vice Mayor Rhonda DiFranco.

DiFranco, seeking re-election to District Seat 1, called Moore's decision irresponsible and said that holding a special election to fill her vacant seat would be an unnecessary cost to taxpayers.

"If she runs as mayor, there are many questions of ethics and legalities that need to be addressed," DiFranco said. "This is quite unprecedented and may be perceived as a misuse of one's authority."

Cook said she "abhorred" Moore's decision.

"The people of the city of North Port elected her presuming she would serve four years, she hasn't even served half of that," Cook said. "What a mockery she is making of the system of being elected as a commissioner."

Bid appears legal

Moriarty, who represents the commission but not Moore independently, said Moore's bid appears legal under Florida's resign-to-run law.

The law requires Moore to submit her resignation, which she had not yet done as of Friday afternoon, at least 10 days prior to the first day of qualifying for office she intends to seek. The first day of qualifying for North Port's District 2 commission

seat is June 20. The law requires the resignation to take effect no later than the date Moore would take office, if she were to be elected.

Moore, 65, a leadership development consultant who formerly worked for AT&T, said she made the decision because of the advent of electoral districts in North Port. She currently holds Seat 4, which was not tied to a district at the time of her election in 2014. She resides in District 2.

Moore described herself as an energetic visionary and said she wanted to focus on ongoing projects such as bringing high-paying jobs, improving access to health care and reducing hunger.

“I do feel like I have momentum, and that I have worked very hard to advance some ideas with the current commission,” she said. “Frankly, it would break my heart to walk away from these projects I am committed to, being a positive influence to my community and being an agent for change.”

She also disputed that she was doing a disservice to those who voted her into office in 2014 by leaving her current commission seat two years early.

“My constituents, my base, want me to continue to serve them,” she said.

Moore said she planned to submit her formal resignation on June 10.

According to Florida law, her resignation cannot be reversed once it is submitted, Moriarty said. That means if Moore loses in either the primary or general election, she cannot retain her current seat.

Driven by residency rules

Moore said her decision was based on North Port's new district residency rules, which are taking effect during this year's election cycle. They require North Port to have a city commissioner from each geographic district.

In 2012, 57 percent of North Port voters decided to amend the city charter and divide the city into districts. When voters were asked in 2014 if they wanted to repeal the decision, so commissioners could continue to live in any part of the city, more than 66 percent of the voters again supported the districts.

The city's electoral lines were decided in December of 2014, dividing North Port into five geographic districts.

If Moore were to serve her entire four-year term in commission Seat 4, she would not be able to run for re-election in 2018, unless she moved to District 4 or 5. The District 2 seat is not up again until 2020.

While filing her candidacy paperwork in the city clerk's office Friday morning, Moore was accompanied by Vanessa Carusone, a former city commissioner seeking election in District 1 this year.

Carusone said she supports Moore.

“Because of districting, people feel disenfranchised, so she is only continuing her commitment,” Carusone said. “This districting issue is beyond her control, just like she fell ill and could not serve beyond two years, it's the same thing.”

Commissioner Linda Yates, who will not be seeking re-election in 2016 or 2018 due to term-limit restrictions, said she understands Moore's position because the district changes came after Moore was elected.

“These conditions were imposed by the voters in 2012. We're seeing the effects of it,”

she said. “At the time the people voted her in, they did not know she would not be able to serve a second term ... I support any decision any commissioner makes that they believe can best serve the community.”

In an email, District 2 candidate and political newcomer Chris Hanks questioned whether Moore was being true to the “sworn commitment” she agreed upon when she became a city commissioner. He wrote there was a groundswell of support for Moore when she campaigned two years ago, and that her supporters may lose faith if she resigns halfway through her term.

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