

Area GOP likes McConnell if Bouchard wins

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

She hasn't formally announced, but Oakland County Commissioner Nancy McConnell has already received an important endorsement if she'd like to replace State Rep. Michael Bouchard, the odds-on favorite to be elected to the state Senate.

"I'm going to support Nancy McConnell for the 65th House District," said James M. Alexander, chairman of the Oakland County Republican Party. McConnell, a Bloomfield Hills Republican, is vice chairwoman of the Oakland County Board of Commissioners.

"She's extremely qualified and she's paid her dues," Alexander said Thursday, the day after a heated and sometimes controversial primary in the 16th state Senate District. "I also hope we can avoid a bloody primary fight," he said. One exchange that many considered the bloodiest of the Republican primary had one prominent Republican accusing another of running a "racist" political advertisement.

FIVE REPUBLICANS battled for the GOP nomination in the 16th District which includes Troy, Birmingham, Berkeley and other southeastern

communities. In the Democratic primary, Thomas Kuhn of Royal Oak was unopposed.

Bouchard won Wednesday's primary by 371 votes, defeating another incumbent state Rep. Gordon Sparks 7,138 to 8,765. A former county commissioner, Susan Kuhn, finished third with 450 votes.

In the June 18 special election, Bouchard is considered the odds-on favorite for a number of reasons, including the area's voting history which is heavily Republican.

If Bouchard wins — as expected — he would vacate his seat in the 65th House District, necessitating another special election. It's that election that McConnell is considering. And it's that election that GOP county chairman Alexander wants to be low key, if not boring.

An example of the kinds of "bloody" exchanges Alexander

would like to avoid came in the 11th hour of Wednesday's GOP primary that was a spirited, nip-and-tuck affair.

IN THE LAST week of the campaign, political heavyweight L. Brooks Patterson, the former Oakland prosecutor now in private practice, endorsed Bouchard over Sparks.

"That ad he ran was racist," said Patterson said. "I didn't remain neutral."

Patterson was referring to a late political advertisement from Sparks decrying Bouchard's support of the so-called schools of choice. Patterson said it was "racist" because it focused on the possibility of Detroit children choosing to attend suburban schools.

Sparks "emphatically" denies the ad was racist. "I just wanted to alert the people to the dangers of cross-

Friday. "I also wanted to distinguish between the two (leading) candidates."

Sparks said Patterson's claim of neutrality is "laughable."

"He (Patterson) was looking for an excuse to get into the election on behalf of Bouchard," Sparks said. That GOP primary — "bloody" or otherwise — is history. But comments between Patterson and Sparks serve to underscore Alexander's concerns about another hotly contested primary that could leave slow-healing political wounds.

THAT ALSO EXPLAINS why Alexander chose to endorse a particular candidate — and early — rather than remaining neutral as is normally the case. But whether Alexander's endorsement is a blessing for McConnell — or the political kiss of death — remains to be seen. "I'm definitely considering a bid."

McConnell said Friday. "I've talked with Jim and other Republicans. They were very supportive and encouraging."

McConnell is currently in her fifth consecutive term on the Oakland County Board of Commissioners. The only other person to announce his possible candidacy is Rex Martin, a Birmingham city commissioner.

If last year's election is any indication, that primary could be crowded. Six Republicans — including Martin — battled for the GOP nomination eventually won by Bouchard.

Others were: Barbara Rexford Fanger, who finished second; Kathy Dalton, third; Martin, fourth; Alfred Dovich, fifth; and David E. Irwin, sixth. As of late Friday, no Democrats had formally announced. In last year's contest, the Democratic challenger was Cheryl Sugerman of Birmingham.

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The search begins. Oakland University has scheduled a special meeting of its board of trustees Wednesday to begin the search for a president to replace Joseph E. Champagne who steps down Aug. 1.

"I expect it to be a laborious process," said Trustee David Handelman of Bloomfield Hills. "Ten years ago (the last time OU searched for a president) we had 300 resumes to consider."

Champagne 53, announced his resignation from the \$120,000-a-year position unexpectedly on May 24. He is resigning to become president and chief executive officer of the Crittenton Corp., a health care organization that includes Crittenton Hospital in Rochester Hills.

Champagne, OU president since 1981, "has been an outstanding president," said Handelman. "He will be missed."

Some trustees speculate an interim president to serve until a permanent president is selected will be named at Wednesday's meeting.

"WE'RE GOING to move promptly" on selecting an interim president, said Trustee Stephen Sharf, also of Bloomfield Hills. "There are just too many things going on (budget preparation and contract negotiations, for example). We need an interim president."

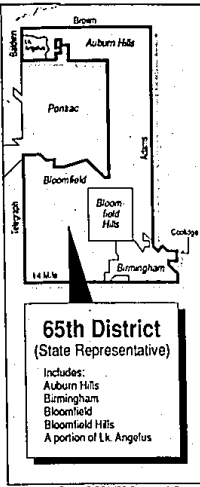
Sharf declined to identify any of the individuals being considered for the interim post. But the board will likely consider all OU vice presidents and deans, he said.

"Nobody from the outside (for interim president)," Sharf said.

While the interim president must possess extensive administrative skills, Trustee James A. Sharp Jr. of Detroit said he or she must not harbor presidential ambition — at least not this time around.

"The person we select must understand that he or she will not be in the running (for permanent OU president) this time around," said Sharp.

Trustee Andrea L. Fischer of Birmingham said selecting the permanent OU president could take a year or longer. "We're going to take our time," she said. "It's an important position."



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