

Hannifan challenges Edwards in Supervisor of Elections race

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Debbie Hannifan of Lakeland is challenging incumbent Lori Edwards to become Polk County's supervisor of elections. Edwards is seeking a sixth term in the position.

LAKELAND — As Polk County Supervisor of Elections Lori Edwards prepares for a challenging election year, she also faces a challenge in her bid for a sixth term.

Debbie Hannifan of Lakeland has filed to run against Edwards in the November general election for the nonpartisan position. Hannifan, a real estate agent, has been active with nonprofits and with Florida's Republican Party but has never before run for office.

Edwards, 62, was first elected in 2000. She won reelection without opposition in 2016.

Though the race is nonpartisan under the Polk County charter, both candidates have well established party ties. Edwards, a Democrat, served in the Florida Legislature from 1992 to 2000 and ran unsuccessfully for Congress in 2010.

Hannifan, 49, has served as state committeewoman from Polk County for the Republican Party of Florida. She said she no longer holds that position.

Hannifan filed to run last fall, and as of Friday she had reported campaign contributions of \$5,570. Edwards, who only filed to run this month, has not yet reported any contributions.

The Supervisor of Elections oversees an office of 26 full-time employees, along with a roster of volunteer poll workers. The position has an annual salary of \$156,036.

"I still have a lot of energy and enthusiasm for this job," Edwards said. "It really is challenging, and I enjoy it. I also think I'm uniquely qualified after 20 years of experience and continuing education for all that time. I think I bring a lot to the job, and this is a very demanding environment for an

elections administrator right now.”

Hannifan, a graduate of Lake Gibson High School, holds a social sciences degree from the University of South Florida. She served as a local coordinator for seven years with the Partners in Policymaking program, which is overseen by the Florida Developmental Disabilities Council.

“Over the past 15 years, I’ve been working in it (elections) as much as I can without working in the office,” Hannifan said, “and so that elections process and the drive to getting that right and making sure everything is done properly — from voter registration to evaluating precincts and precinct organizing and election results, all the way to early voting, vote by mail and election-day operations — I’ve been very boots-on-the-ground working in that.”

Hannifan didn’t offer any major criticisms of Edwards but said she thinks it is time for a change in the Supervisor of Elections office. If elected, Hannifan said she would work to increase participation rates in elections, drawing on her experience to booster Republican voter turnout.

“I want everyone to understand the process and become more engaged in the process, and I think that will naturally drive up the turnout rate and participation,” she said.

Edwards said voter interest in candidates drives participation. Though turnout tends to be low for municipal elections, she expects potentially record participation for the 2020 general election.

Edwards, who has a degree in business administration from Warner University, said she has worked to increase opportunities, such as early voting.

“What I think that our elections office can do and we strive for everyday is to make sure there are no obstacles for people to cast their ballots, and that’s why convenience is so important,” Edwards said. “We can’t make people interested in voting, necessarily, but we can raise awareness of voting opportunities and make sure it’s something they can take advantage of on their schedule.”

Edwards said all elections supervisors face the increasing challenge of threats to election security. Russian hackers penetrated election systems in two unidentified Florida counties in 2016, according to news reports, and further attempts are expected this year.

“There are threats that we have never seen in this industry before,” Edwards said. “Specifically, I’m talking about all the cyber-security concerns. That’s added an additional layer to the job, where you need expertise and continuing vigilance.”

Hannifan said she’s confident that Florida’s affiliation with the Electronic Registration Information Center, a national nonprofit coordinating with states to maintain election security, will provide benefits for Polk County.

After years of working on partisan campaigns, Hannifan said she relishes the idea of a campaign with a broader focus.

“This is a race that kind of excites me because it is all voters,” she said. “Independents get to vote, no-party-affiliation voters get to vote. It’s just kind of on a bigger scale because the 430,000 total voters we have are up for grabs.”

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