

Assessors Trounce 'IQ' Candidates Vote percentages rise for Mire and Jefferson

Sunday, May 21, 2006

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Despite pouring more than \$150,000 into a bruising campaign to unseat the city's seven assessors, the so-called "I Quit" ticket came up dry Saturday night as two incumbents crushed political neophytes who failed to energize voters with their promise to end politics as usual.

In the 1st District, Darren Mire beat church fund-raiser Maria Elliott by a nearly 2-to-1 margin, while two-term incumbent Betty Jefferson easily out-pollled sports marketer Chase Jones.

Elliott and Jones campaigned on the theme of creating a single elected assessor in New Orleans. Four other I.Q. candidates were defeated in April, while a fifth, lawyer Nancy Marshall, beat 6th District Assessor Albert Coman with 55 percent of the vote.

Mire and Jefferson garnered a far larger percentage of the vote Saturday than they did during the primary.

"I personally feel the whole I.Q. thing fizzled after the primary," Mire said. "Their initial message was that they had to have seven seats to consolidate operations in New Orleans. Then they were going to consolidate three offices. But we all know that can't happen. So what's the point?"

Lawyer Shaun Rafferty, campaign manager for the I.Q. candidates, said he doesn't think Saturday's vote is a rejection of the I.Q. message. It simply looks like the incumbents did a better job of getting their voters to the polls, he said.

"They won by adding turnout in the precincts they won in the primary," Rafferty said.

Among the I.Q. candidates, Mire was widely viewed as the most capable of the seven incumbents. In fact, most I.Q. members spoke approvingly of his work, saying he did a good job of turning around one of the worst-run districts in the city. Since taking office in 2002, Mire boasted during the campaign that he had increased the assessments of 9,000 of the 11,000 properties in his district from 20 percent to 75 percent.

Jefferson did not enjoy the same reputation. In a blistering report of all seven districts last year, the Louisiana Tax Commission singled Jefferson out as the worst-performing assessor in New Orleans, noting that the uniformity of her valuations was off by 55 percent, versus an acceptable error rate of 20 percent.

In one case, Jefferson valued a Garden District property at \$243,200, while the commission's appraiser said the house was worth \$850,000. The low assessment saved the homeowner about \$11,000 per year.

Jefferson didn't return several calls Saturday night. A spokeswoman for her campaign hung up the phone after a Times-Picayune reporter called for a comment.

The city's assessors became politically vulnerable after a series of reports documented widespread inequities in local assessments. In 2003, the Louisiana Tax Commission found that almost half of the properties in New Orleans owned by assessors or their families were undervalued as much as 70 percent.

The Tax Commission discovered more problems when it did another study last year. Overall, the commission concluded that 80 percent of assessments in New Orleans were flawed.

The reports renewed calls for the Legislature to shrink the number of assessors in New Orleans, the only major city in the country to have more than one assessor. But lawmakers killed a bill during the February special session that would have created a single assessor's office in the city.

The move sparked the creation of the "I Quit" ticket, whose seven members argued that uneven assessment practices are the reason New Orleans has some of the highest millage rates in the country. By creating a uniform approach, they claimed, they could reduce millage rates citywide.

Fed up with failed efforts to reform the office, a group of well-heeled lawyers and real estate agents recruited unknowns to run against some of the most entrenched politicians in the state.

Several of the incumbents can trace their family's control of their districts back as much as 100 years, and they typically breeze through the qualifying period without drawing any opponents.

Mire, who came close to winning in April with 48 percent of the vote, waged a tough campaign. In one of his fliers, he belittled Elliott's track record, dismissing her as a "practicing musician who admits she is not qualified and plans to hire outside consultants to do the job for her."

Mire said he credits the I.Q. group with the success of a bill in the state Senate that would create a single elected assessor in Orleans Parish. A similar bill will be taken up in a House committee this week.

"They did a lot of advertising and public relations on the one-assessor issue, so this was a win for them," Mire said. "Because this legislation had never gotten out of (committee) before."

Elliott never denied that her credentials came up short, especially compared with those of Mire, who spent five years mediating property tax disputes for commercial property owners before winning the assessor's seat in 2002.

Elliott works as director of giving at Trinity Episcopal Church, where she has helped raise more than \$20 million to run the church and pay for outreach programs during her 10 years there. She has no real estate experience.

Though Jefferson's family connections helped propel her into office eight years ago, they became something of a liability this year. Two people already have pleaded guilty to a scheme in which they allegedly helped funnel bribes to U.S. Rep. William Jefferson, D-New Orleans, in exchange for official favors.

William Jefferson has not been indicted on any criminal charges and recently denied any wrongdoing.

But Jones tried to capitalize on the family's legal troubles. In one flier, he attempted to smear Betty Jefferson by calling attention to the federal investigation of her brother. "The Jeffersons maneuver the political chess board for their own game," the flier reads. "Now there's a way to put them in check. . . . With your vote, you can take Betty Jefferson out of the game and clear the board of cronyism."