

NEWS

Stargel Faces Write-In's Smith, Watts

ROBIN WILLIAMS ADAMS THE LEDGER

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LAKELAND | Lakeland resident Kelli Stargel will be the only candidate listed under Florida House District 64 when residents of that northern Polk County district cast their Nov. 4 general election ballots.

She beat two other Republicans in the primary election and none of the other parties have posted candidates.

But there are two write-in candidates: the Rev. Alton C. Smith, an old-school "bread-and-butter" issues Democrat who wants to restore faith in government, and Gordon Wayne Watts, a Republican, who is "fighting for conservative values and defending traditional liberal causes better than most liberals."

KELLI STARGEL *The Ledger*

Both men are eligible to be elected, but not to have their names printed on the ballot. Voters would need to write them in.

That means Stargel, 42 and a lifelong Republican, officially remains on the campaign trail, even though the tenor of the campaign has quieted considerably since August.

It is quiet enough that she was able to devote two weeks after the primary to making sure one of her daughters, Amanda, "had a wonderful wedding."

Although she isn't worried about Watts' and Smith's candidacies, Stargel said she takes what they're saying seriously because some people agree with them.

And they will be her constituents, she said, after the election she expects to win.

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The dramatic downturn in the economy is what she considers the biggest change since the primary.

"The economy has become a huge focus," Stargel said. "We're still predicting major cuts (in state financing) ... I'm trying to prepare myself for what is the best way to cut our budget as painlessly as possible."

Education and school choice are major issues for the part-time businesswoman, along with lowering insurance rates.

She reported \$104,022 in contributions through Sept. 22.

Through Sept. 25, she had spent \$81,994. Her biggest expense since the primary election was \$10,000 for consulting to Political Insights in Ellenton.

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For Smith, 77, a strong economy, affordable health care and quality public education are some core issues.

But he consistently puts forward the issues of eroded trust in government and the importance of trust between elected officials and voters.

"I would vote yes for taxes, but only with the approval of my people," said the retired educator and missionary.

With the economy the way it is, he said, that approval isn't likely to happen for a while.

Smith, who listed \$50 in contributions, spent \$36 on developing the Web site he uses as one of his primary methods of communicating with voters. His other ways of reaching voters are newspaper coverage and public forums.

Watts, 42, has filed lawsuits in high-profile cases, including the Terri Schiavo case. That 2005 case involved a Tampa woman whom doctors declared brain dead. Her husband wanted to pull her feeding tube, a move opposed by her family. The battle gained national attention and drew in state and federal lawmakers and courts. The feeding tube was withdrawn and Schiavo died.

He said not being afraid to impeach bad judges and change wrong laws are key to his campaign. Educated in biology and chemistry, and a former security guard, he currently is unemployed.

Watts raised \$154 through Sept. 27. About one third of that was listed as donations from Linda Ivell, Republican state committee woman for Polk County.

Watts recently said Stargel asked him to run as a write-in candidate to keep the Republican primary closed.

He did it, he said, to illustrate the "loophole" that lets write-in candidates close a primary.

Stargel said she talked to Watts when he called her "early in the campaign" to discuss issues. In discussing "the dynamics of my campaign," when the subject got onto closed or open primaries, Stargel said, Watts wanted to run to express his opinion.

"I didn't say 'Run and close my race for me,' " she said.

Smith said a Stargel supporter asked him to run for that reason.

He said he supports closed primaries, in which only members of a particular party can vote, but that he regrets not going the extra step to put himself on the ballot. That also would have kept the primaries closed, while allowing him more exposure as a candidate.

[Robin Williams Adams can be reached at robin.adams@theledger.com or 863-802-7558. Read her blog at robinsrx.theledger.com.]

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