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'Tacoma girl,' firefighter vie for seat 6

City council: Race billed as one between insider, outsider

LEWIS KAMB; The News Tribune

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In what's billed by the candidates as a contest between the insider and the outsider, the race for Tacoma's at-large city council seat pits Victoria Woodards against Keven Rojecki.

Woodards is an assistant to Pierce County Councilman Tim Farrell and also serves as president of the Metropolitan Parks board. She calls herself "a Tacoma girl" who has lived most of her life in this city and draws strong support from local politicians, past and present.

"I know the people and I know the needs here," Woodards said. "And, if I need to find answers for the issues I'm not familiar with, I know where to find them."

Rojecki is an 18-year firefighter for the City of SeaTac who also serves as chairman of the state's Gambling Commission. He says his experience working on state issues will bring the new viewpoints, contacts and experience that are sorely needed on the City Council.

"What we really need to do is to hit the reset button for Tacoma," Rojecki said. "I can bring the fresh perspective and the strong Olympia connections that we need to get things done."

Adding intrigue to the race are soaring campaign contributions to both candidates. As of Tuesday, donations to Rojecki have outpaced those to Woodards, about \$84,000 to \$68,000, records show. Both camps boast large cash reserves heading into the campaign's final days.

While Woodards has garnered much of her support from local labor unions, most of Rojecki's donations have been bankrolled by firefighters from around the state.

Woodards questions the motivations behind such out-of-town contributions. "I do wonder, what's their interest in Tacoma?" she said. "I don't know the answer to that question, but I think it's interesting."

Rojecki said the support comes from friends and peers statewide who trust in his leadership. He noted such out-of-town donors "obviously don't expect political favors," and countered he's more suspicious of large donations from city employees to his opponents' campaign.

"If a city employee is giving \$1,500 to a candidate, what's in it for them?" he said.

The winner in the citywide race stands to inherit the Position 6 seat being opened by term-limits on two-term Councilman Mike Lonergan. With the job comes a \$37,024 annual salary.

VICTORIA WOODARDS

Woodards, who's 44 and single, has mostly lived in Tacoma since her father was stationed at McChord Air Force Base when she was three. She graduated from Lincoln High, then enlisted in the military "hoping to see the world." Instead, she was stationed at Fort Lewis. "At that point, I realized that this is where I'm supposed to be," she said.

Woodards has worked in the public, private and nonprofit sectors and served on a variety of boards, including as chairwoman of the Joint Municipal Action Committee and the state Commission of African American Affairs. In 2004, she was appointed to the Metropolitan Parks board, then won election to a six-year term the next year.

Woodards counts as her top issue "creating a climate for businesses to locate and stay here," by offering rewards to existing firms and improving the city's quality of life to draw new ones.

"When businesses relocate and bring their workers to a new city, they're looking for a place where people can live holistically," she said.

Other goals for Woodards include making City Hall more efficient by collaborating more with other government and community agencies; and developing a comprehensive transportation plan to build more public transit options and improve streets.

"I'm taxed to the max myself," she said. "But I think our citizens will rally when we decide that fixing our roads is a priority."

At a recent candidate's forum, Woodards declined to state her position on the massive North Shore development, which seeks to build hundreds of homes over a Northeast Tacoma golf course and has drawn neighborhood opposition.

"I don't want to paint myself into a corner and state a position when I believe this is something that will definitely come before the council," said Woodards, who later won the Master Builders Association's endorsement. She added that while serving on the parks board, she has responded to requests from opponents to the development by "getting them the public information and resources they need."

Other key endorsements include current and former Tacoma mayors Bill Baarsma and Harold Moss, six sitting city council members and three county council members, among others.

KEVEN ROJECKI

Rojecki, 41, a married father of three, grew up on Vashon Island and settled in Tacoma with his wife, a preschool teacher, 14 years ago.

"My wife and I chose to raise a family here because we love Tacoma," Rojecki said. "I want to help make this a great city."

As a full-time SeaTac firefighter, Rojecki has spent the past nine years as a Washington State Council of Fire Fighters board member, lobbying for firefighters' issues in Olympia.

In 2006, Gov. Chris Gregoire appointed Rojecki to a six-year term on the state's Gambling Commission.

Rojecki also is active in Tacoma, as a member of the North End Neighborhood Council and board member of Community in Schools-Tacoma, a nonprofit that seeks to improve academic achievement.

Rojecki cites public safety as his top issue, saying he'll seek to reduce city crime by finding ways to hire more police.

"The number of officers we have is really low for a city this size," he said.

Transportation and the environment are also big issues for Rojecki, who said he would use his state experience and contacts to help secure transportation dollars. That includes the matching funds needed for Tacoma to tap into \$80 million available for light rail development under a recently approved Sound Transit initiative, he said.

"I have the relationships to help Tacoma get that money," Rojecki said.

Rojecki believes he likely lost the Master Builders Association's endorsement to his opponent because he didn't support the North Shore development.

"I don't think it's a prudent," he said of the project. "The mitigation problems will be substantial."

Rojecki has won endorsements from U.S. Rep. Adam Smith, state House Speaker Frank Chopp, Senate majority Leader Lisa Brown and state Sen. Rosa Franklin, among others.

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