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Fund-raising to the forefront

JUDICIAL CANDIDATES' POLICIES DIVERGE

By Ryan Afessi
HERALD-LEADER FRANKFORT BUREAU

In a state Supreme Court race that is fast-becoming a poster-campaign for judicial election ethics, Fayette Circuit Judge Mary Noble claimed yesterday that she will blindfold herself when it comes to political donations to avoid knowing which attorneys have supported her.

In the meantime, Justice John Roach's answer to the conundrum that judges face when taking campaign donations from attorneys is to make public the contribution list more often.

Thus, the opponents in the next year's Supreme Court 5th District race have chosen different paths to attempt to navigate the political minefield judges face when their campaigns accept donations from attorneys who have or might appear before them in court.

"The public loses faith in the court system and in the rule of law when judges are viewed as biased or unfair or politically partisan," Noble told 50 people -- mostly attorneys -- at her first fund-raiser yesterday morning. A donation was not required to attend the event.

"It is also true, however, that attorneys are the best informed about the candidates, and they have the strongest interest in seeing which judges are elected, because they work with the judges," she added.

The issue ballooned last week in the race when Roach's campaign listed as a host of an upcoming fund-raiser an attorney who had just participated in a Supreme Court case.

While there's nothing illegal about that, some judicial election observers have warned that such situations could be perceived negatively by voters.

In response to last week's development, Noble said yesterday she will avoid knowing who gives to her campaign. And if she does stumble upon any such information, she said, she would disclose the contribution of the attorney in open court.

Roach's campaign questioned Noble's motives, particularly after Noble had received a contribution months ago from at least one attorney -- Julie Butcher of Lexington -- who has a case before her.

Butcher said via phone from a conference in Arizona that when she returns, she plans to inform the opposing counsel in that case that she gave to Noble's campaign.

Overall, Carla Blanton, Roach's interim campaign chairman, dismissed Noble's plan, saying that a candidate is responsible for tracking campaign finances "to be accountable."

To shine the light on such contributions, Roach's campaign plans to voluntarily post donor lists monthly on its campaign Web site to help voters and court observers stay informed, Blanton said.

Noble in September asked Roach to set voluntary campaign spending limits. At yesterday's fund-raiser, she read part of his three-sentence note in which he "regretfully" declined her offer.

Blanton said Roach believes current \$1,000-per-election donation limits are appropriate and disagrees with Noble's "premise that judges have compromised their integrity" by receiving many donations.

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