

Secretary of State's Race

Over the past several months, this column began analyzing the upcoming 2010 races for Ohio's five constitutional offices and the open U.S. Senate seat. In this issue we'll examine how the race for secretary of state is shaping up. Currently held by Jennifer Brunner, who is running for the U.S. Senate, in 2010 this will be an open seat.

The Ohio secretary of state serves as the state's chief elections officer, overseeing the elections process and appointing the members of county boards of elections. Additionally, the office receives and approves articles of incorporation for Ohio corporations; grants licenses to out-of-state corporations doing business in Ohio; approves amendments to filed documents, mergers, consolidations and dissolutions; and registers trademarks, trade names, service marks and fictitious names.

The election of Ohio's next secretary of state is one of those statewide races with broad ramifications beyond the duties of the office. Along with the governor and state auditor, the secretary of state sits on the five-member state Apportionment Board. The three state-wide constitutional officers serve with two members appointed by state legislative leaders – one Republican and one Democrat. This is the board that decides the make-up of state legislative districts – a powerful role that often influences which party controls the state legislature.

That means there's a lot at stake. Following the 2008 election cycle, the Democrats took control of the Ohio House for the first time in 14 years. So, the Republicans are anxious to win back control and believe they have a good chance of doing so in 2010. But whether they are up to the task or not, a victory could be short lived if they don't have control of the Apportionment Board when the district lines are redrawn following the 2010 census. Likewise, the Democrats want to hold on to the House in 2010, and with control of the Apportionment Board, design districts that will ensure a bigger House majority and a shot at control of the Senate.

Both political parties want to field candidates for secretary of state who can raise the money necessary to mount the kind of aggressive campaign that will put this office in their "win column."

On the Republican side, two candidates have announced their intention to run: former speaker of the Ohio House and current State Senator Jon Husted and former Ashtabula County Auditor Sandra O'Brien. The Ohio Republican Party has endorsed Sen. Husted.

Although Sen. Husted is extremely well known around "Capital Square," he has never run for a statewide office. He began his service in the Ohio legislature in

2000, when he was elected to the Dayton area, 37th House District. With just a few years of legislative experience under this belt, he was elected speaker of the house in 2005 and was re-elected to that position in 2007. Term limits forced him out of the House at the end of 2008 and he successfully ran for the 6th Senate district seat he currently holds.

During his tenure in the Ohio legislature, Sen. Husted has become known as a very successful fund-raiser. This should bode well for his first state-wide run. He's also a savvy policy expert who was instrumental in leading the effort to enact major tax reforms in 2005. Sen. Husted is a champion of improving education by expanding school choice and an advocate of improving the quality of Ohio's workforce by emphasizing training in science, technology, engineering and math.

Sandra O'Brien is challenging Sen. Husted in the Republican primary. She is a teacher and former Ashtabula County Auditor who holds a masters degree in administration. Although her credentials may pale in comparison to her opponent's, her candidacy cannot be taken lightly. She has strong support from the socially conservative wing of the Republican Party, and has been able to successfully capitalize on that support in the past.

In 2006, the relatively unknown O'Brien stunned Republican leaders when she challenged incumbent State Treasurer Jeanette Bradley in the primary and won. Despite her lack of money and statewide name recognition, O'Brien tapped into the social values voting bloc and pulled off an upset. The general election was another story, however, when she lost her bid to become state treasurer to Richard Cordray by 16 percentage points.

On the Democratic side, what was shaping up as a tough primary between two experienced women office holders, has apparently become an easy bid for State Representative Jennifer Garrison. Garrison was set to challenge Franklin County Commissioner Marilyn Brown in the Democratic primary for secretary of state. Neither woman had run state-wide before, but the "Brown" name is golden in Ohio and was sure to make it a tough race, even for someone as tenacious as Garrison. Then, on October 1, Brown announced her decision to step aside, giving Garrison a clear shot at the nomination.

Rep. Garrison, an attorney who hails from Marietta, is in her third term in the Ohio House. When she ran for the seat, she defeated former Republican Lt. Governor and State Representative Nancy Hollister by taking her from the right – staking out more conservative positions on many issues. She currently serves as majority floor leader and during her tenure in the House has worked on economic development, education and energy issues. She is an advocate for transparency and openness in government and is known for her persistence, determination and hard work.

The 2010 secretary of state contest is clearly shaping up to be an intense, big money race with high stakes for both political parties.