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Few Vying for Knoxville City Council Vacancies

Only 10 candidates have surfaced to run in next fall's city election

By Joe Sullivan

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What a difference eight years makes in the disposition of Knoxvilleians to run for City Council.

When term limits were first imposed in 2001, some 30 candidates vied to fill the five council seats that were thereby vacated. The victors in those spirited contests—Joe Hultquist, Barbara Pelot, Steve Hall, Rob Frost, and Mark Brown—all ran and deservedly won again in 2005, but now they are term-limited as well.

So another outpouring of aspirants to fill those seats without having to challenge entrenched incumbents was to be expected, you would think. But so far you'd be wrong.

Only 10 candidates have surfaced to date to run in next fall's city election. And in several of the five districts, only one or none of them would appear to be serious contenders. While the filing deadline remains two months away, efforts to enlist well credentialed competitors in at least two districts have thus far been unavailing.

In the 1st District (South Knoxville), former councilman and cable TV executive Nick Pavlis is unopposed in his bid for a return to office after having been term-limited eight years ago.

In the 2nd District (West Knoxville), the civically active general manager of the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Ken Knight, who gave Pelot a very close race in 2005, would appear to be an odds-on favorite over a young political newcomer.

In the 3rd District (Northwest), neither of the announced candidates have any political or civic experience. But someone who does, Ellen Adcock, is considering this race. Adcock was a senior deputy to former Mayor Victor Ashe, came very close to beating Hall in 2005, and now serves on the board of Knoxville's Community Development Corp.

Only the 4th District (North Knoxville) has any semblance of a contest between two established candidates. Nick Della Volpe is a lawyer who has presided over both the city's Public Facilities board and a neighborhood organization, and he has the backing of both Frost and the district's illustrious councilmanic predecessor, Carlene Malone. The other declared candidate, Ray Abbas, who unsuccessfully challenged Joe Bailey for an at-large seat on council in 2007, is also a community activist, helping homeless people find jobs on behalf of the Salvation Army and serving as president of the board of the Love Kitchen. James Hudgins, who is a process server with no political connections, is also considering the race.

In the 6th District (East Knoxville) the two announced candidates are both political newcomers but are a generation apart. David Dupree is a 49-year-old lawyer who grew up in Knoxville, but only moved back here three years ago. Jason Foster is a highly articulate 25-year-old who was president of his class at Center High School and an honors graduate of Howard University. He now serves as enterprise director for Tribe One, the inner-city youth mentoring program that's become at-large City Councilman Chris Woodhull's life's work.

The 5th District council seat and its three at-large seats are on a different election cycle and won't be contested until 2011.

There are several theories why this year's council races are attracting so few candidates compared to eight years ago. One is that the 2001 elections were much more in the limelight as the first in which term limits were being imposed upon incumbents who had been serving for up to 20 years. Leadership Knoxville conducted workshops for potential candidates to replace them, and there was a lot more media attention to the upcoming election then.

Another is that city government is running smoothly now compared to a lot of turbulence in 2001. Then Mayor Victor Ashe and several council members were the subject of a petition effort to recall them at that time. The Recallistas, as they were known, failed to get enough signatures to bring recall to a vote, but they did succeed in fanning flames of discontent over what was widely perceived to be an unresponsive city administration.

Beyond that, there's conjecture that last year's special elections to fill the vacancies on County Commission created by the imposition of term limits on that body, amid great controversy, drew candidates who might otherwise have run for City Council this year, thus depleting the ranks of people prepared for the rigors of campaigning.

Be all that as it may, it will be unfortunate if there's not healthy competition in this year's council races. The five seats on the ballot represent a majority on that body. And beyond governing the city in difficult economic times they could well be called upon to appoint an interim mayor to serve the balance of Mayor Bill Haslam's term (until the fall 2011 elections) if he is elected governor in 2010.

"It's a shame. It's very disappointing," Councilwoman Barbara Pelot says of the lack of competition so far this year. "When people are elected without any opposition you don't get the strongest representation. I learned a great deal about myself and the city from being tested in a campaign. It made me a more responsive person."

Pelot has tried without success to enlist others to run in her 2nd District. "The people I've approached find it too daunting," she reports. Similar efforts on the part of South Knoxville neighborhood activist Rachel Craig and others have so far been unavailing in the 1st District. Craig herself is ineligible to run because she's a member of the Metropolitan Planning Commission.

On the other hand, I am pleased with the candidates who are the clear frontrunners in the 1st, 2nd, and 4th Districts. If Adcock opts to run in the 3rd District, as I hope she will, that would

come close to filling out a slate of new council members who are both steeped in the workings of city government and exemplary individuals.

While Pavlis is a relative newcomer to South Knoxville, he served ably as an at-large member of council from 1993 to 2001. Alone among this year's candidates, he already has a campaign website which promises that he will be "an effective advocate to represent them and make sure the 1st District receives its fare share."

Since coming to Knoxville in 1993 as general manager of the Radisson Hotel (as the Crowne Plaza was then known), Knight has been civically active in a variety of ways: as a past president of the Dogwood Arts Festival and as a member of the board of the Knoxville Tourism and Sports Corp., the Volunteer Ministry Center, and the Downtown YMCA, among others.

Della Volpe would be a worthy successor to Frost and Malone in the 4th District which extends from Fountain City to Holston Hills, where Della Volpe resides. Like Frost, he'd bring a lawyer's perspective to council, and he shares Malone's passion for neighborhood issues and for causes such as billboard limitation and greenway expansion. Della Volpe has served as chairman of the city's Public Assemblies Facilities Board which oversees Chilhowee Park and the Civic Auditorium and Coliseum, and he's also headed an effective neighborhood organization, Town Hall East.