

# Education funding key factor in commission races

By Ian Berry

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Strong opponents of the Hamilton County Commission's 26 cent tax increase last year saw little success in Tuesday's primary races.

Four such candidates lost by decisive margins Tuesday.

In all four races, the winner was either an incumbent who voted to approve the increase or a newcomer who pledged to provide adequate funding for education and increase cooperation with the Hamilton County school district.

County Republican Party Chairman Bobby Wood said the results stem from an organized effort by some on the Board of Education and school system to increase support and funding. He said Tuesday's results could indicate a "disturbing trend" that could lead to more tax increases.

"There was a definite trend in that direction," Mr. Wood said.

Some of the candidates themselves downplayed any trend and pointed to Commissioner Fred Skillern's victory over challenger Laura Oakley. Mr. Skillern, who voted against last year's increase, won 70 percent of the vote against Ms. Oakley, who had pledged better cooperation with the school district.

Mr. Skillern said it was too soon to tell how the arrival of Democrat John Allen Brooks and Republican Jim Coppinger would affect the commission and whether it would make future tax increases more likely.

"If it was a single issue, it would be easy to define," Mr. Skillern said. "But in every race you had multiple issues."

Mr. Brooks defeated Lou Miller after stressing more cooperation with school officials. He said the commission made the right decision in raising taxes last year, although he didn't think another increase is needed now.

Mrs. Miller voted against last year's increase and told voters her opponent was "running for the sole reason of raising taxes."

Mr. Coppinger said he couldn't judge the commission's tax decision last year. He said any tax increase would be a last resort, but he added that schools must be adequately funded. His opponent, Terry Conley, opposed last year's tax increase.

Mr. Coppinger has stressed cooperation among commissioners and with the school district.

"I've always said that's why I'm running, that's what I'm trying to do: To make a difference and work together," he said.

In other races, incumbents Larry Henry and Richard Casavant each won 68 percent of the vote. Their respective opponents, Red Burrows and Ken Holloway, both said the tax increase was the main issue.

Mr. Burrows' campaign slogan was "a vote for Red Burrows is a vote for no property tax increase."

Mr. Holloway, of Signal Mountain, opposed construction of a new Signal Mountain high school.

Some of those displeased with the skirmishes between the commission and school district during the past couple of years said they were pleased with Tuesday's results.

Hamilton County Democratic Party Chairman Stuart James said Tuesday's results were not a coincidence and offered a lesson on winning this election season: "It's education, stupid."

River City Co. President Paul Brock, a Republican, said he threw his support behind Mr.

Brooks, a Democrat, because he wanted more cooperation and accountability. He said better support for schools was his top issue.

"I felt Mr. Brooks could be part of the solution to move things forward," Mr. Brock said.

In the county's Aug. 3 general election, Republican Commissioner Curtis Adams, who voted against last year's tax increase, will face Democrat John Bailes, who has stressed better cooperation with school officials in his campaign.

Mr. Adams said his main problem was with outgoing school Superintendent Jesse Register and that the arrival of new Superintendent Jim Scales in July will lead to better cooperation regardless of who joins the commission. "I think that will automatically happen," Mr. Adams said. "I think with a new superintendent, we will all want to support him. I know I do."

Mr. Adams received 817 votes in Tuesday's Republican primary, and Mr. Bailes received 733 votes in the Democratic primary.

Other commission races will include Democratic incumbent Greg Beck against Republican Bernie Miller; Democratic incumbent Warren Mackey against Republican Brian Caldwell; and Dr. Casavant against independent Joe Dumas.

Commissioners will be sworn in for new four-year terms on Sept. 1. E-mail Ian Berry at [iberry@timesfreepress.com](mailto:iberry@timesfreepress.com)