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**Capitol View  
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**The Nebraska Press Association**

**Contentious Legislative Races About to Wrap Up**

Following a contentious pandemic protracted legislative session, it should come as no surprise that campaigning for half of the seats in the Legislature has – in some cases -- turned ugly, very ugly.

If the race between incumbent Julie Slama and challenger Janet Palmtag in southeast Nebraska’s First District were a TV game show it would be called “Whose Republican Party Is It Anyway?” Both women are Republicans. Slama, a law college student, was appointed to the seat by Governor Pete Ricketts. Palmtag has the endorsements of former Gov. Dave Heineman, Congressman Jeff Fortenberry and former District One State Senators Roger Wehrbein of Plattsmouth and Dave Pankonin of Louisville.  
 The Nebraska Public Service Commission is investigating the Nebraska Republican Party for illegal robocalls that falsely claimed Palmtag was lying about the endorsements. The commission issued a cease and desist order against the party. That’s the same Republican Party that was called out early in the campaign for a controversial mailer linking Palmtag with “extreme” Sen. Ernie Chambers of Omaha. A photo-shopped picture of the two – they’ve never met – was included and termed “race-baiting” by Heineman and others. Ricketts responded that it was appropriate political comment.

The PSC complaint said: the Nebraska Republican Party failed to file the required legal disclaimer with a phone number, web address, or mailing address of the caller; failed to file a copy of the script with the PSC within 24 hours of placing the calls; did not have a permit to operate robocalls within the State of Nebraska. The Nebraska Accountability & Disclosure Commission is also investigating illegal coordination of $75,000 in political donations by the party to the Slama campaign.

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In the 49th District, a race between a Republican incumbent and the Democrat challenger who actually outpolled him in the primary also featured a questionable mailer. Another Ricketts appointee, Sen. Andrew La Grone of Gretna is running against Jen Day, a Democrat who owns a southwest Omaha strength and conditioning gym.

Day objected to a La Grone brochure sent out recently that described her as “too extreme” – there’s that word again -- and unwilling to do what’s necessary to keep families safe. Those charges are inaccurate, she said, because she has two young sons and every reason to back law enforcement and public safety. She chuckled at a La Grone brochure – guess who sent it out? – that included a picture of one of her volunteers whom the La Grone campaign confused for Day. That reflects poor attention to detail, she said. La Grone called it a mistake and a distraction from real issues.

In some ways, the District 49 race mirrors the divide in national politics. La Grone said he and his opponent have “incredibly different views” and that his philosophy aligns with the majority of voters in the district. Day said Nebraska’s tradition of having a nonpartisan Unicameral Legislature is “turning into Washington-style politics.” Nebraska’s state senators have to be willing to have hard conversations with each other, she said, and find ways to compromise.

The race to succeed Chambers, the longest serving senator, boils down to a young newcomer he endorsed facing a veteran officeholder who has been around North Omaha politics a long time.

Chambers has endorsed 30-year-old Terrell McKinney, a college career counselor, law student and former Omaha high school wrestling standout who is three years younger than Chambers was when he was first elected to the Legislature a half-century ago. The challenger is 72-year-old Fred Conley, the first Black man elected to the Omaha City Council in 1981. He’s also been on both the Metropolitan Community College and Papio-Missouri River Natural Resources District boards.

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Conley said he’s running on over 40 years of community involvement. McKinney said he sees himself as part of a new generation of young Black leaders who are passionate about North Omaha and ready to stand up for its people.

Another Omaha race features John Cavanaugh, a Democrat who is the son of a former state Senator and U.S. Congressman by the same name and the brother of current state Sen. Machaela Cavanaugh. If the 39-year-old public defender wins, the Cavanaughs would be the first brother-sister act in the Legislature.

He’s running against Marque Snow, also a Democrat and president of the Omaha School Board.

In Grand Island, Democratic incumbent Sen. Dan Quick is being challenged by former state senator Ray Aguilar, a Republican. Quick won his race four years ago by fewer than 100 votes to represent District 35, which includes the city of Grand Island. Aguilar, 73, served in the Legislature from 1999 to 2008.

Aguilar said his previous experience in the Legislature makes him a natural choice. He said he prided himself on his ability to form coalitions across the aisle. “All I’ve heard since I’ve been gone is how it’s not the same Legislature,” he said, “and people are not getting along.”

*J.L. Schmidt has been covering Nebraska government and politics since 1979. He has been a registered Independent for 20 years.*

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