

Primary election boasts a few surprises

Written by By Bill Donovan Special to the Sun
Friday, 08 June 2018 03:39



Most incumbents retain seats

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McKinley County Sheriff Ron Silversmith can look forward to another four years in office thanks to the voters in McKinley County.

Silversmith, who was seeking his second term in office, was the top vote getter in the June 5 Democratic primary for county sheriff, since no one filed in the Republican primary. He is now set to be sworn in on Jan. 1 without doing anymore campaigning unless someone filed as a write-in candidate for the general election.

In fact, no one filed in the Republican primary for any of the races in this year's primary so all the winners of the Democratic primary will go on to be sworn in as well.

As is usually the case, incumbents did well with only one, Magistrate Judge Robert Baca not being re-elected. He was defeated by Virginia Yazzie.

Silversmith easily won the McKinley County Sheriff race, although his unofficial vote total - 3,053 - added up to only 41 percent of the total vote. Silversmith faced five other challengers.

They were Matthew Highbanks (1,316), former sheriff Felix Begay (1,063), Benjamin Benally (953), Kenny Carabajal (513) and Robert Mazon (466).

Charley Long Sr. was re-elected to the McKinley County probate judge position with 3,199 votes, as compared to 2,249 votes for Janice Begay and 1,436 for Arleen Brown.

April Silversmith will serve another term as magistrate judge, getting more than 70 percent of the vote to 29.73 percent for her challenger, Johnny Greene.

In the other magistrate position, Yazzie received 3,863 unofficial votes as compared to 3,316 votes for Baca.

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Billy Moore proved he was as popular with Navajo voters in his district as he was when he ran two times for McKinley County commissioner in the past and won. He received 792 unofficial votes as compared to 756 for George Tolth, 712 for Olin Kieyoomia and 628 for Sonlatsa Jim-Martin.

Next to the commission race, the District Attorney race was also tight, with Paula James-Pakkala winning a narrow victory, getting 3,376 unofficial votes to 3,312 votes for John Bernitz, a public defender in the county.

Her election marks the first time in 16 years that county voters elected a non-Indian to that position. Bernadine Martin, a former chief prosecutor for the Navajo Nation, had filed to run in the race but she was removed from the ballot when she was not able to get enough valid signatures because she found herself ill during the time she was securing the signatures.

While current state law will not allow Silversmith to run for a third term, he is hoping that will change by 2012.

“We almost got term limits removed this past year,” he said but the measure died when some legislators wanted to end term limits for every elected position, not just for sheriff.

Silversmith said he thinks it will eventually pass because when the people get a good sheriff, they should be allowed to keep him on. Otherwise, they risk the possibility of a “bad” sheriff being elected after the sheriff leaves because of term limits.

He stressed that he was very appreciative of the Navajo voters in the county supporting him even though on the campaign trail he underwent a lot of criticism from the chapters in his county for failing to get a cross-commission agreement with tribal law enforcement approved.

Silversmith campaigned heavily on that four years ago but he said he found himself dealing with other issues and that one just got slipped into the background.

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“That won’t happen again,” he said, adding that the support he received was so overwhelming and appreciative that he plans to start addressing that issue immediately.

The *Gallup Sun* reached out to other candidates for comment, but were unable to reach them by press time.

By Bill Donovan
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