

Not many hotly contested races so far in election for Florida Legislature

By JENNA BUZZACCO-FOERSTER

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TALLAHASSEE — Nearly half of this year's state legislative races are no races at all, with many incumbent lawmakers running unopposed for re-election.

Of the 140 state Senate and House seats up for grabs, 60 sitting legislators had no opposition as of last week, including four in Southwest Florida, state Division of Elections records show. There are seven Southwest Florida seats in play.

That's not to say it's going to be a quiet election year.

In Lee County, four of the five lawmakers running for re-election will face opponents. While some will face a primary challenger, others are just looking toward November.

Rep. Ray Rodrigues, R-Estero, is running for re-election. State records show he will face Charles Messina, a St. James City Democrat, in the November general election.

Rodrigues was first elected in 2012 to the District 76 seat. The south Lee County district covers coastal Lee County and includes Bonita Springs, Fort Myers Beach, Pine Island and Sanibel.

Rodrigues currently doesn't have a primary opponent, but said he wouldn't be surprised if another Republican jumped in the race.

"When you're coming off your first term as an incumbent is when you're the most vulnerable," Rodrigues said. "(That's when) you're most likely to draw a challenger."

While Rodrigues is getting ready for November, state Sen. Lizbeth Benacquisto, R-Fort Myers, is gearing up for August.

Benacquisto will face Bokeelia Republican Michael Dreikorn and Fort Myers Republican Thomas LePine in the Aug. 26 primary. This will be the second time Benacquisto and Dreikorn go head-to-head in an election in 2014 both ran in the congressional District 19 special primary earlier this year.

Rep. Matt Caldwell, R-Lehigh Acres, will face Matthew Shawn Miller, an Alva Republican, in August. The winner of the District 79 primary will then face Lehigh Acres Democrat Larry Aguilar in November. Rep. Dane Eagle, R-Cape Coral, has two primary challengers — Cape Coral Republican Jim Roach and North Fort Myers Republican Terry Bowen Cramer III.

State records show Rep. Heather Fitzenhagen, R-Fort Myers, is running unopposed.

While elected officials in Lee County are preparing for a battle, Rep. Kathleen Passidomo and Rep. Matt Hudson, both Naples Republicans, are running unopposed.

Passidomo said she might be running unopposed as of now, but knows a lot can change before the end of qualifying, the time period for candidates to file papers to get on the ballot. It's from noon, June 16, through noon, June 20.

"I am prepared," she said. "My philosophy is that I welcome any competition."

While the races in Southwest Florida aren't heated, some political experts said the races to watch will be just a few counties away.

"I think the exciting races will be in Pinellas County," said Darryl Paulson, a professor emeritus of government at University of South Florida in St. Petersburg. "Most of the rest of the state is noncompetitive."

Paulson attributes this to term limits that hold Florida senators and representatives to eight years in office.

"People just wait for that 8-year cycle to end to challenge someone," he said.

Democrat Judithanne McLauchlan, a political science professor at University of South Florida in St. Petersburg, is taking on GOP state Sen. Jeff Brandes in his cross-bay district that takes in parts of St. Petersburg and Tampa.

In House District 67 (Clearwater, Largo), three Democrats and three Republicans, including Chris Latvala, are vying to replace term-limited state Rep. Ed Hooper, R-Clearwater.

Latvala, Hooper's former aide, is the son of state Sen. Jack Latvala, another Clearwater Republican.

Jack Latvala is running for re-election and now faces another Republican and a third-party challenger.

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