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Johnson Could Have Real Race This Time

by John Hammer

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The race is on, and it appears that this year, for the first time in over a decade, there will actually be a competitive mayor's race.

Mayor Yvonne Johnson, 66, filed to run for reelection on Tuesday, July 7, and Bill Knight, 70, filed to run on Wednesday, July 8.

Mayor Johnson spent \$2,600 on her campaign kickoff event, which is much more money than many City Council candidates spend on their entire race.

Yvonne Johnson, who is Greensboro's first black and second female mayor, long ago said that she wanted to serve a second term and it appears she is going to run a full bore campaign to ensure that she does.

Knight, who is a retired accountant, said he plans to raise enough money to get the job done, and he realizes that knocking off an incumbent is not going to be easy or cheap. Knight ran in the at-large race for City Council in 2007. He finished fourth in the primary and sixth out of six in the general election. So he has some experience running.

However, Yvonne Johnson has been on the Greensboro City Council since 1993. She served 14 years as an at-large city councilmember and then was elected mayor in 2007. Back when NC state Rep. Earl Jones was a city councilmember, he used to complain that it was unfair to elect the at-large candidate with the most votes as mayor pro tem because a black candidate could never receive the most votes in a three-way citywide election. Jones was proven wrong by Johnson in 1999, when she received the most votes in the at-large race and was elected mayor pro tem by the council. She served as mayor pro tem from 1999 to 2005, when Sandra Anderson Groat won the at-large race with the most votes and was elected mayor pro tem.

So not only has Yvonne Johnson been on the City Council since 1993, she has run seven citywide races. In 2007, she defeated developer and contractor Milton Kern to be elected mayor.

When Kern, who is well known in parts of Greensboro and has received a good bit of recognition for some of his downtown projects, filed, it appeared that there would be a real mayor's race for the first time in years. However, Kern reportedly ran into personal problems that kept him from focusing on the campaign. Late in the campaign season he held a press conference to announce that he was still in the race. He got no television coverage, and other than the five print reporters who showed up, he had his mother, his campaign manager and two supporters.

Even though Kern didn't do much campaigning he still received 43 percent of the vote, which is an indication that 43 percent of the voters are going to vote against Yvonne Johnson, no matter who is running against her.

From 1999 to 2007, Keith Holliday was mayor and he never had a challenger who had the money or name recognition to give him a good run.

In fact, to find a close mayor's race you have to go all the way back to 1995, when Tom Phillips ran against Carolyn Allen. Phillips won the primary but was defeated in the general election by the Underground Railroad to the Polls, which was engineered by the late Rev. Michael King. The News & Record knew about the coordinated effort to get black voters to the polls, but didn't write about it, and the heavy voter turnout in east Greensboro and light voter turnout in the northwest gave Allen the margin of victory.

In 1997, the editor of a popular weekly newspaper ran a write-in campaign, which made the race interesting but it really wasn't close. (OK, I ran and received 33 percent of the vote, but Allen won pretty easily with 47 percent. Cameron Cooke, who was on the ballot, came in third.)

The mayor's race that political aficionados still talk about was between David Brown and Vic Nussbaum, who ran against each other in 1987. The candidates each spent over \$100,000 on their campaigns, which was unheard of at the time and hasn't been matched since in a Greensboro mayor's race.

Knight is the treasurer for Congressman Howard Coble's campaign, so he should know some folks who donate to conservative candidates. When he ran in 2007, Knight was the most outspoken candidate against the actions of former City Manager Mitch Johnson. Knight said that Mitch Johnson should no longer be city manager, but a lesser position in city government could be offered to him. Those words now seem to have been prophetic. Tuesday, March 3, Mitch Johnson was removed as city manager but allowed to continue working for the city as a special assistant to the city manager until July 15, which is next Wednesday, when Mitch Johnson will be fired. The additional time allowed former City Manager Johnson to qualify for retirement benefits.

Mayor Johnson voted against removing Mitch Johnson from office, but to her credit she handled the meeting well when the majority voted to fire him.

Knight's accounting background could be real asset to the City Council. Councilmembers this year have struggled to get basic information about the city's financial situation, like how much money the city has in the bank and how much money would be raised by a proposed water rate increase.

But Knight and Yvonne Johnson have a lot in common. Both grew up in Greensboro, went to college here, raised families and spent their professional lives in Greensboro. Both are proud grandparents.

In the at-large race, as of Wednesday, incumbent Groat has filed, along with Marikay Abuzuaiter (who ran in 2007), Max Benbassat and Danny Thompson. City Councilmember Robbie Perkins and former City Councilmember Nancy Vaughan are both expected to file. The current rumor is that Rocky Scarfone, who owns a number of restaurants and clubs, is going to file to run in the at-large race, but by Wednesday he had not filed.

District 1 is shaping up to be a big race. Both City Councilmember Dianne Bellamy-Small and local blogger Ben Holder - a native and longtime resident who moved back to Greensboro last month - have filed to run in District 1. Holder is opinionated, outspoken and energetic. If he wins it will be a first for District 1, because District 1 has

never elected a white councilmember. Also planning to file in District 1 is Daron Sellars.

In District 2, Jim Kee has filed to run for the seat currently held by Councilmember Goldie Wells, who is not running for reelection but came down to help Kee file. Gordon Hester has also filed in District 2. Ryan Shell has announced that he plans to run in District 2 but had not filed as of Wednesday.

District 3 Councilmember Zack Matheny has filed to run for reelection. Matheny has been one of the swing votes on this council and cast one of the deciding votes to remove Mitch Johnson from office in March. It appears that Matheny is coming into his own as a councilmember. Also filing to run in District 3 is George Hartzman.

In District 4, Joel Landau, who ran for an at-large City Council seat in 2007, has filed and so has Joseph Rahenkamp, who files to run in every election but doesn't campaign and doesn't win. District 4 Councilmember Mike Barber announced he is not running for reelection. However, At-large Councilmember Mary Rakestraw announced that she plans to run for the District 4 seat. So a sitting councilmember will be running for the District 4 seat but won't be running as an incumbent. Rakestraw has not yet filed.

Rakestraw served on the Guilford County Board of Commissioners and is one of three councilmembers that has been pushing the majority on this council to take action, like replacing Mitch Johnson. The other two are Barber, and District 5 Councilmember Trudy Wade, who has also filed for reelection. It is amazing how much these three have accomplished in the past two years, because it takes five votes to get anything done.

In addition to Wade, Art Boyett has filed to run in District 5. Wade defeated long time District 5 Councilmember Sandy Carmany in 2007.

Wade and Rakestraw are the reason the residents of Greensboro don't have a water rate increase this year. They kept plugging away at the issue and found the main reason the city staff wanted to raise the rates was to keep a huge fund balance, another term for savings account.

Filing for the City Council election closes Friday, July 17 at noon. The primary is Tuesday, Oct. 6, and the General Election is Tuesday, Nov. 3.