

Challenger's tactics trigger early support for Wolfgram

Written by BILL SCHANEN IV
Wednesday, 06 February 2013 19:50

Voiland's continued focus on recall petition prompts chiefs, sheriff to back judge now

Law enforcement officials in Ozaukee County announced their support for Circuit Court Judge Tom Wolfgram this week in an unusually early endorsement triggered by the controversial campaign of challenger Joseph Voiland.

Voiland, a 40-year-old lawyer and Town of Grafton resident, has attacked Wolfgram, an 18-year veteran of the Ozaukee County Branch II bench, on a single issue — his signing of the Gov. Scott Walker recall petition. Last month Voiland's campaign purchased several internet domains that include Wolfgram's name and launched the website tomwolfgram.com, which displays the recall petition the judge signed.

The chiefs of all police departments in the county, as well as Sheriff Maury Straub, endorsed Wolfgram in a letter to the editor of Ozaukee Press this week — two months before the April 2 election — because, some said, they want to make sure Voiland's recall petition tactic doesn't interject partisan politics into a nonpartisan race and distract voters from Wolfgram's exemplary record as a judge.

"Judge Wolfgram has demonstrated the qualities of a person seeking a judicial position — honesty, integrity and compassion," the chiefs and sheriff wrote in the letter.

The Voiland campaign's purchase of domain names such as judgewolfgram.com and its creation of a website that is not run by its namesake but rather his challenger has raised ethical questions.

"Not being much of a high-tech sort of guy, I'm not exactly sure what to think about this," Straub said. "Maybe it's astute, or maybe it's just dirty politics."

Ozaukee County District Attorney Adam Gerol, a Wolfgram supporter, said he doesn't know of any law that prohibits a candidate from creating a website in an opponent's name and using it to campaign against him, but others said there are ethical considerations at stake.

"Even candidates for judicial posts are bound by the ethical guidelines of the Supreme Court rules," said Branch III Circuit Court Judge Sandy Williams, who was the county's longtime district attorney before being elected to the bench in 2009.

Wolfgram said he had intended to use at least one of the domains purchased by the Voiland campaign for his website.

"We hired someone to set up a website for us and they said all the names we wanted had already been purchased," he said. "They (the Voiland campaign) exploited my name before I could use it for my website."

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"It certainly surprised me."

Instead of judgewolfgram.com, which was purchased by Voiland's campaign, Wolfgram settled for reelectjudgewolfgram.com.

"I'm disappointed something like this happened in the context of a nonpartisan judicial campaign, but I continue to focus on my performance as a circuit court judge over the last 18 years and my longstanding record in the community."

Voiland defended his campaign's website tactic, saying it is a legitimate way to disseminate information about a candidate for public office.

"Anyone who says this is unfair politics is just unhappy that the information is out there," he said.

Voiland noted that the tomwolfgram.com website includes a statement that makes it clear his campaign is responsible for the content.

Underneath an image of the recall petition on the website is a statement that reads, "This page is paid for by Friends of Joe Voiland, Jake Curtis treasurer, and not by Judge Tom Wolfgram or any other candidate or committee."

Curtis, a lawyer and Ozaukee County supervisor from Grafton, is listed as the administrative contact for at least two of the domains that include Wolfgram's name, according to the web hosting company GoDaddy.com. Curtis did not return messages left for him Tuesday.

Website aside, Saukville Police Chief Bill Meloy said, the recall petition doesn't have any relevance in the judicial race.

"I certainly didn't sign the recall petition, but I don't see how Judge Wolfgram signing it has any relevance to any decisions he makes on the bench," Meloy said. "I respect him for the reasons that are important — the job he has done as a judge. I'm proud to support him."

Voiland is the first challenger Wolfgram has faced in his 18 years on the bench.

Wolfgram has spent nearly his entire legal career in Ozaukee County. After graduating from Marquette University Law School in Milwaukee, he served as an assistant prosecutor and district attorney in the county.

After six years in private practice, Wolfgram was appointed to the bench, a position he was elected to in 1995, 2001 and 2007.

In 2008, Wolfgram, who is the county's presiding judge, was named Judge of the Year by the State Bar of Wisconsin.

Voiland, also a graduate of Marquette University Law School, specializes in financial

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services litigation with the Milwaukee-based law firm Reinhart Boerner Van Deuren.

He has served as counsel to the State of Wisconsin in litigation regarding the 2011 congressional and legislative redistricting and to Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice David Prosser during the recount of votes cast in the 2011 Supreme Court election.

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Voiland served as a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy before becoming a lawyer.