

Judicial appointment process signals ‘new day’ in the Summit County Republican Party



DOUG LIVINGSTON | Akron Beacon Journal

Behind the political appointment of a Summit County judge is a move by Republicans to let an old feud die. But as they seek to improve the party’s chances of winning, a new rift among leadership has taken shape.

With two years left on her six-year term, Judge Katarina Cook was elected in 2020 to replace retiring Judge John Quinn, a Democrat who held the second judge’s seat in the Summit County Domestic Relations Court. The

move — running for a job she already held — gave Republicans the opportunity to appoint Cook's replacement, which gave the party control of the entire court.

Democrats pulled the same move last year with a sitting Cuyahoga Falls councilman winning an open seat. But the countywide judicial race gives Republicans the rare opportunity to settle a rift in the party that's spanned three decades. The rift had hurt the party's chances of winning packed nonpartisan races and pitted conservatives against one another in primaries that cost more time and money than the party otherwise would have liked to spend.

The deal is in who the Republicans are nominating to serve the last two years of Cook's vacated position. While filling vacant seats otherwise elected by the people is a process led by partisans, this appointment is especially steeped in the future and past politics of the county party.

More: Governor mulls short list for vacant domestic relations judgeship

Leadership of the Summit County GOP — appointed by members elected to the party's central committee — met in person and via Zoom last month to draft a list of nominees to send to Gov. Mike DeWine, who ultimately selects the county's next domestic relations court judge.

A DeWine spokeswoman said the governor is interviewing the candidates and looking over credentials with no timetable on when he'll pick one.

An ad hoc screening committee met after the November election to interview six candidates who applied for the job. Three names were selected. A fourth was added by the executive committee in December before the list was sent to the governor Dec. 23.

'Irregular' proceedings

Who is on the executive committee matters because they assemble the ad hoc screening committee and ultimately approve the names for the next judge for a court with 34 employees, not counting the two judges, that handled 4,719 cases in 2020.

Some longtime leaders in the Summit County GOP — including former Cuyahoga Falls Mayor Don Robart, state Sen. Kristina Roegner and County Council members Beth McKenney and Gloria Rodgers — were not put back on the party’s executive committee during an organizational meeting in June. Some of these household names in local Republican politics did not support Joe Masich — a close ally of Summit GOP Chairman Bryan Williams and past director of the county elections board — in his failed March 2020 primary bid to knock Akron attorney Jim Simon off the state central committee.

Current and former members who attended or heard from others at the December executive committee meeting in Richfield told the Beacon Journal that new members — or some who’ve barely spoken in the past — made and supported the motions that added Corinne Hoover Six’s name to the list of possible judicial appointments. These members spoke on the condition of anonymity so they could freely discuss disagreement among party leadership.

Six is an Akron attorney who practices family law. She is one of six who applied for the judge appointment through the Summit County GOP, which sent four names for DeWine to choose from to fill Cook's open seat.

The meeting was odd, they said, and not just because of the “highly irregular” motion on the floor to add a name to a list of candidates already approved by an ad hoc screening committee.

Members arrived as COVID-19 cases surged in the community and were told others would be joining via Zoom. That option was not advertised in advance, they said. Some older members chose not to attend.

Williams supported the motion to add Six to the list, which was affirmed by an unclear voice vote. Seeking clarity, executive committee member Alex Pavloff, a former leader of the young Republicans of Summit County, motioned that the vote be recorded using a secret ballot.

His motion was denied.

“To my knowledge, the executive committee has never amended a report of the screening committee from the floor,” Pavloff said. “I found it highly irregular.”

Robart agreed. The former mayor is no longer on the executive committee as Williams pursues a mutually beneficial relationship with Judge Kim Hoover. Hoover, who is the father of Corinne Hoover Six, has butted heads with Robart since the judge led relocation of the municipal court from Cuyahoga Falls to Stow in 2007.

Examining contributions

Members who attended said they heard Williams mention \$45,000 in contributions as a reason for supporting Six as a judicial candidate. Williams, who said Six is his top pick, spoke with the Beacon Journal last week but has not returned several calls made in the past few days regarding

the dollar amount.

Campaign finance reports show that Six and her father gave heavily to Judge Cook's campaign in the primary when she had no opponent. Six's law firm spent \$815 catering a breakfast fundraiser in January that generated nearly \$15,000 in donations, including \$2,785 from the firm and \$600 from Judge Hoover. Barberton Clerk of Courts Diana Stevenson, whose husband, Scot, is also a nominee for domestic relation judge, gave \$600 at the event that drew support from others in the party.

Some of the money would help Cook — and by extension the local party — in the general election, during which \$6,000 flowed from Cook's campaign to the Republican Party's judicial committee. That committee also received \$16,000 from Judge Hoover and his daughter, who haven't given directly to the county party in decades.

“This year, we did make a change in our past procedure and did donate money to the Summit County Republican Party,” said Six, who comes from a family with siblings from opposite ends of the political spectrum and a father in the middle. “The argument and the dispute my dad had with [the late party Chairman] Alex Arshinkoff was probably 35 years ago at this point. Many of the players in that rift are deceased, at this point in time. My father has always had a respect for Bryan. And we’ve decided that we work better together than in opposition to one another.”

Overcoming icy divide

Six said the contributions reflect a thawing relationship between her family and the Summit County Republican Party. For decades the family would not support the party while it remained in Arshinkoff's tight grip.

The old beef began when Gov. George Voinovich tapped Hoover for Summit County prosecutor in 1995. Six said her dad was given a list of employees to fire, but he wouldn't. (Hoover would go on to make a career of hiring Democrats and Republicans alike, and winning reelection for more than a

decade as an independent.)

Voinovich skipped Hoover and gave the job to Maureen O'Connor, who is now chief justice of the Ohio Supreme Court.

In 2008, Arshinkoff was blocked from another term on the county elections board when Secretary of State Jennifer Brunner consulted fellow Democrats and sitting board member Wayne Jones, who recommended Akron attorney Don Varian instead.

Hoover was close friends with Jones and some other Democrats like Russ Pry. The judge said that relationship, along with how he spent his political donations, never sat well with Arshinkoff, who was a mentor to Williams.

Hoover said he and Williams are now talking about possibly supporting the same candidates because of Six. His daughter, a former spokesperson for the effort to dethrone Arshinkoff, is now playing political matchmaker to strengthen the party by aligning interests and supporting younger candidates who will lead the party into the future.

“I guess this all started with Corinne, and I’m not sure when it made sense for her to take the judgeship. Bryan apparently supported her,” Hoover said.

Competitive edge sought

While Judge Hoover said he and Williams haven’t come so far as to discuss candidates, the plan is for the GOP to become more competitive in judicial and nonpartisan races such as the perennial slugfest for the six-figure clerk of court’s job in Stow. The race tends to draw former mayors, state senators and other big hitters. Last year, Williams ran Cuyahoga Falls City Councilman Jeff Iula, who volunteers often at the Republican county headquarters, against two men who work for Judge Hoover: Steve Stahl, a former police

chief and councilman in Munroe Falls, and Bradford Chapman, a University of Akron law school student.

Emerging from the crowded field, Democrat Amber Zibritosky won with less than half the vote. Originally appointed to the seat, she's up for reelection this fall.

"It's a Republican district," Williams said of the 16 communities covered by the Stow Municipal Court, including Cuyahoga Falls, Stow, Tallmadge and northern Summit County. "The clerk's race there is a priority race for us."

Arshinkoff, who excelled in raising funds for the party, was criticized for not recruiting viable candidates for local races in Summit County. He died in 2017, between two of the best years in the past decade for judicial candidates with a D beside their names.

Williams has run the local party since 2014. And he's not in the business of losing or letting issues of the past hold the party back. "And when Kim [Hoover] retires, we want a Republican in that seat. That's what we do," Williams said.

Hoover isn't completely on board, he said. The political maverick said Williams had better bring him a good candidate. And he's still skeptical of the party, whose leaders on the ad hoc screening committee questioned Six during her interview about her father instead of sticking to her credentials as an attorney.

"I was kind of distraught to hear that they were attacking her in the small committee, the ad hoc committee," Hoover said. "I said, 'Man, when you're treated like the devil's spawn, it's kind of hard for me to get behind the party

at all.”

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