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Six Democrats float names for Water District

BY THE SUN-TIMES EDITORIAL BOARD

Last Modified: Feb 17, 2012 08:11PM

There is no shortage of candidates in this year's Democratic primary who say they want to help keep the Chicago region's water clean and out of your basement. Six are vying for three spots on the Democratic ballot for the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District of Greater Chicago.

The three party-backed candidates — incumbent Debra Shore, Kari K. Steele and Patrick Daley Thompson — are squaring off against incumbent Patricia Horton, Stella B. Black and Patricia Young.

Young, a commissioner from 1992 through 2009, is trying to get her old job back. Steele and Black ran in 2010, but lost in a nine-way primary.

The newcomer is Thompson, 42, grandson of former Mayor Richard J. Daley and nephew of the more recent incumbent at City Hall. A zoning and land-use lawyer, he is making his first run for political office and says he thinks the district should do a better job of managing water use.

“I think we can improve on the [water] reclaiming . . . and not just flush that down with the sanitary,” Thompson told the Chicago Sun-Times Editorial Board.

Founded in 1889 to protect Lake Michigan, the district, which encompasses Chicago and 125 suburbs, is responsible for treating sewage and preventing flooding. It's a \$1.6 billion-a-year agency with 2,100 employees. Of its nine commissioners, three are elected to six-year terms every two years.

A long-running battle over whether to disinfect effluent before releasing it into Chicago area waterways was partly resolved last year when the board voted 8-1 to do so at two of its plants. Among the issues now looming before the board are completing the reservoir portion of the Deep Tunnel project and removing nutrients from treated wastewater that flow down the Mississippi River and contribute to a “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico.

Shore, 59, has been a leading environmental voice on the board since her election in 2006. She's a founding member of the Friends of the [Cook County] Forest Preserves and long supported disinfection of treatment plant effluent.

“When I ran six years ago, I did so because I believe water is going to be the issue in years to come,” Shore said. “I remain ever more convinced of that.”

Steele, 36, a senior formulating chemist for L'Oreal, worked as a water chemist for six years at the city's Jardine Water Filtration Plant. She is the former chairman of the Young Democrats of Cook County and is

the daughter of Appellate Court judge John Steele, former alderman of Chicago's 6th Ward. She feels her scientific background would be an asset to the board.

"Laboratory testing plays a major part in monitoring and treating our wastewater," she said.

Black, 70, is a property tax consultant who lives in Chicago. In the 1980s, she served two terms as assessor in Downstate Centralia. She says she could draw on her experience to help the Water District save money on real estate contracts. With 9,000 acres, the district is the largest landowner in Cook County.

"If you don't have fiscal responsibility, you don't have money for the environment," she said.

Besides being a former commissioner, Young, 56, worked in the MWRD's public affairs office from 1977 through 1992, when she was elected commissioner. In 2009, she quit her seat on the board to return to her \$90,000-a-year civil service job, where she was promoted to manager in January 2011. She quit again in September to run for her old seat on the board. Young also ran in 2000 for clerk of the circuit court and for 42nd Ward Democratic committeeman, but lost both races.

Now, she says, her extensive Water District background makes her a good choice to return to the board.

"With all the water-quality issues that are before the board of commissioners — phosphorus, nutrient removal issues — I think the . . . institutional knowledge that I have of the district is really critical," Young said.

One-term incumbent Horton, 55, who started out in now-retired state Sen. Rickey Hendon's West Side political organization, last year lost a race for city clerk to Susana Mendoza. In 2006, Horton was elected to the water board as an ally of Shore without Democratic slating, and Horton said she is proud of the pro-environment record she and Shore have compiled.

"We showed the public [in 2006] that we were the best viable candidates, and we still are," Horton said.

The winners of the primary will face three Green Party candidates — Julie Samuels, Dave Ehrlich and Karen Roothaan — in the fall. No Republicans filed for the primary election, but the party can appoint candidates after the March 20 primary, as it has done in the past.

Sun-Times Editorial Board

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