

TRI-CITY HERALD

Tri-City lawyers polled on judicial hopefuls

KRISTIN M. KRAEMER, TRI-CITY HERALD

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Tri-City lawyers have given overwhelming support to colleague Sal Mendoza Jr., picking him as the best choice of four candidates to be the next Benton-Franklin Superior Court judge.

Mendoza received 60 out of a total 66 votes in a recent Benton Franklin Counties Bar Association poll.

The Kennewick attorney is seeking to fill the seat that will be left vacant when Judge Craig Matheson retires April 30.

"It was obviously gratifying to see your peers support you and respect you," Mendoza told the Herald. "I think the bar sort of sees the work that you've done over your career, and I think they have a good gauge of measuring your abilities and your potential and your commitment to the community."

Because Matheson -- who's been on the bench for 26 years -- is leaving just months into another four-year term, Washington Gov. Jay Inslee will be selecting his replacement.

Four lawyers have expressed interest in the position and submitted their paperwork to the governor's office.

In addition to Mendoza, they are: Assistant U.S. Attorney Alex Ekstrom, who practices throughout the Eastern Washington district; Paulette R. Burgess, a criminal lawyer who practices in Grant and Spokane counties; and Ted Sams, a Pasco attorney whose area is administrative/regulatory, consumer and criminal law.

The candidates are set to be interviewed the second week in April with state General Counsel Nicholas Brown.

Brown will make his selection and refer the finalists on to Inslee for a final interview, which could happen in mid- to late-April, according to Susan Beatty, the governor's office legal affairs coordinator and executive assistant to general counsel.

Inslee, who also is filling judicial seats in King and Clark counties, then will announce his top choice for the bicounty judicial system.

Beatty said the office does not know when that will happen.

To help in the selection process, the local bar asked its approximately 180 members to evaluate their peers for the judgeship. The poll was calculated with 66 submissions, and the results will be reviewed by the general counsel and the governor.

In the overall first choice category, Ekstrom trailed Mendoza with five votes, and Sams received one. Burgess didn't get any votes.

Thirty-nine lawyers said Mendoza is "exceptionally well qualified" in his legal ability, with Ekstrom getting 20 votes and Sams one. Votes also came in under "well qualified," "qualified" and "not qualified." Some felt they had insufficient information on the candidates, with 58 saying that for Burgess and 47 for Sams.

As for judicial temperament, Mendoza got 45 exceptionally well qualified votes, Ekstrom 25 and Sams one. Sixty-one said they didn't know enough about Burgess and 49 for Sams.

Forty said Mendoza is exceptionally qualified with his integrity, with Ekstrom getting 26 votes and Sams two.

And as to relevant experience, 43 voted for Mendoza as exceptionally qualified, with 21 for Ekstrom and two for Sams. Burgess got one "qualified" vote.

Mendoza, 41, has been a lawyer for 15 years, including a year as an assistant attorney general and a year as a deputy prosecutor in Franklin County. He also has helped out as a pro tem judge in juvenile, municipal, district and superior courts.

Mendoza unsuccessfully ran against Bruce Spanner for a vacant Superior Court seat in 2008. He said he feels he has a calling for this work, and that his breadth of experience will be helpful to him on the bench.

Mendoza lives in Kennewick with his wife and their three children.

Ekstrom, 43, worked in private practice before going to the Franklin County Prosecutor's Office. He also worked in the Benton County Prosecutor's Office before becoming a federal prosecutor in 2008.

Ekstrom said he's enjoyed his career in public service and this is the next step for him in this community because the bench is where he wants to end up. He lives in Richland with his wife and their three children.

Ekstrom said earlier in the application process that even though he's submitting his name for consideration, he is supporting Mendoza because he thinks his friend is "enormously qualified" and the right man for this job.

Burgess, 43, started practicing law in 1997 in Tennessee, where she was in-house counsel for Financial Institution Consulting Corporation.

After moving to Washington 13 years ago, she went into journalism and worked as circulation director and managing editor for Bozzi Media in Spokane. She was associate editor for The Local Planet, and later went on to own and edit the weekly newspaper until it went under financially in April 2004.

Burgess served as corporate counsel for Purcell Systems, Inc., in Spokane Valley before getting her full license to practice law in Washington in 2007. Since then she has been representing indigent criminal defendants.

Burgess said she sent her application "for any vacancy for which I'm qualified," leaving the specific court blank on the form. She has dreamed about being a judge since a law school professor talked about everything that can be done with the degree.

"What made me apply was ... for professional growth to move on to a different facet of the law. It's not a different area, but it's a different way to be in the law," said Burgess, who recently was married and has two children, ages 9 and 22.

She said she last represented a client in Benton-Franklin courts about five years ago.

"I think what I could offer for the people that come before the bench, whether they're prosecutors or they're defendants or they're petitioners, is that I am unbiased," she told the Herald. "I'm not beholden to any select group in those counties."

Sams could not be reached Friday for comment. The Washington State Bar Association website says he has his own law firm, and was admitted to practice law in June 2001.