

2 longtime Tri-Cities attorneys want to restore trust after embattled judge stepped down

By Cameron Probert

Tri-City Herald (Kennewick, Wash.) *The Tribune Content Agency*

Updated October 25, 2024 6:44 PM

Two long-time Tri-City attorneys are seeking to fill the seat of an embattled former Superior Court judge in November's election.

The candidates - Court Commissioner Bronson Brown and Franklin County Prosecutor Shawn Sant - promised they don't have any lingering issues in their pasts that will haunt them.

The two candidates are seeking to replace former Judge Sam Swanberg, who left the bench ahead of a hearing by the Washington state Commission of Judicial Conduct.

The commission ruled he should be barred from holding a position as a judge because of his alleged abuse of his ex-wife and harassment of an ex-girlfriend.

While Swanberg has admitted to his behavior with his ex-girlfriend, he's denied any abuse of his ex-wife.

Brown and Sant promised that the public doesn't have to worry about skeletons surfacing from their pasts.

"I can tell you, if you dig into Shawn and you dig into me, keep digging," Brown told the Tri-City Herald. "I don't think you're really going to find anything that's going to concern you."

This is the second attempt for both men to earn a seat at the seven-member panel of Superior Court judges that are shared between Benton and Franklin counties.

Both men sought to replace Judge Bruce Spanner after his retirement in 2020. They were eliminated in the six-person race in the primary. Judge Dave Petersen ultimately won that seat.

Sant has been the Franklin County prosecutor for 14 years and serves in the U.S. Army Reserves judiciary and legal system. He's also served as a public defender and a deputy prosecutor in his 20 years of practicing law.

Brown has spent two years as a court commissioner and has served as the general counsel for the Kennewick School District and other government organizations and a public defender in Benton County District Court during his 21 years as an attorney.

The person picked for the nonpartisan position will serve for four years and be paid \$228,000 a year.

Brown has the lead in fundraising according to the Washington State Public Disclosure Commission. He raised nearly \$15,000, with about \$5,000 in loans to his campaign.

Sant has raised nearly \$12,000, all of it from donations.

Brown also has managed to gather an impressive list of endorsements from the legal community, including the overwhelming support the Benton Franklin Bar Association.

Superior Court judges handle the most serious criminal cases, as well as civil cases, major juvenile offenses, probate, divorces and various land disputes.

State ethics rules prevent candidates from talking about specific decisions they would make on issues if elected.

Bronson Brown

Brown, a father of five, grew up in the Tri-Cities, and has spent his career practicing law in the area. He's provided legal advice to the Kennewick School District since 2003, spent time as a public defender and as a municipal prosecutor and was West Richland's city attorney.

He's also the attorney for Grandview School District and the Benton County Clean Air Agency.

"I've had the opportunity to work with most of the public agencies here in the Tri-Cities," he said.

For two years, he's served as a Superior Court commissioner, a position that takes on most of the same duties as a judge but is not elected position. They oversee some of the dockets, which allows judges to handle more complex matters. He also serving as a judge pro-tem in Franklin County.

Brown made the decision to seek out the judicial positions after his failed run in 2020. He said people asked whether he would like the job, but he didn't know because he never did it before.

"So the last two years, I'm doing the job," he said. "Being on the bench is a little different. As a prosecutor, you're seeking justice. As a defense attorney, you're being an advocate for your client. As a judge, you're being a fair and impartial adjudicator and making sure people's Constitutional rights are safeguarded and the rules are being followed."

A number of Tri-Cities legal luminaries have lined up to back him, including all of the Superior Court judges, most of the Benton County District Court and the court commissioners.

If the judges hadn't been willing to endorse him and were afraid of supporting a sitting prosecutor, then they could have not endorsed anyone, he said.

He's also gotten endorsed by former Kennewick Police Chief and current Port Commissioner Ken Hohenberg and West Richland Mayor Brent Gerry.

A Benton Franklin Bar Association poll showed 84% of attorneys said he was their first choice for the position, supporting him over Sant.

The association polled its about 150 members and received about 100 responses. Of those, 60 attorneys feel he is exceptionally qualified for the position.

Shawn Sant

Sant also has deep ties to the Tri-Cities. He grew up interested in pursuing a career in the law. His grandfather was a retired Richland Police Department officer who joined in 1959, he said.

Before heading to law school, he spent three years as a reserve police officer in Richland, and then another two as a Prosser police officer.

He served four years in the U.S. Air Force, and earned his law degree, and went to serve as a Franklin County deputy prosecutor and then a public defense attorney.

He's been the Franklin County prosecutor since 2011. In addition to prosecuting criminals, his office is responsible for legally defending and advising the county and its departments.

Sant noted in his role as prosecutor he's helped argue thousands of cases, requiring him to weigh evidence, determine the correct charge and whether it's supported by the law.

"I'm kind of doing the role that I would do on the bench," he told the Tri-City Herald editorial board. "Obviously in a very different capacity, but I feel that is a very good experience to have, being able to be on both sides."

His experience has given him a feeling for the impact judicial decisions have on the people who appear in court.

Sant ran for prosecutor as a Republican, but he's tried to present himself as someone who is committed to following the law. He pointed to the position he took during the investigation into the shooting of Antonio Zambrano-Montes by Pasco police in 2015.

"I made a commitment to both the public as well as to everybody involved that we're going to receive and review the information," he said. "We're going to make a decision based on the law."

Copyright (C) 2024, Tribune Content Agency, LLC. Portions copyrighted by the respective providers.