

Tennant: Primary win built on more than name recognition

By Justin D. Anderson
Charleston Daily Mail

Democrat Natalie Tennant will go on to face Republican Charles Minimah in the race for the Secretary of State post in November after easily taking the nomination over two challengers with roots in the statehouse.

"I thought that I could win it," said Tennant, a North Marion and West Virginia University graduate. "I didn't know what the numbers would be."

Incumbent Secretary of State Betty Ireland, a Republican, opted out of running for any political office this year. Minimah ran unopposed.

Despite her lack of political credentials, Tennant jumped out to an early lead in the race and consistently drew away from House Majority Leader Joe DeLong and longtime Senate Majority Whip Billy Wayne Bailey.

With all the state's precincts reporting, Tennant had 51 percent of the vote compared to DeLong's 36 percent. Bailey had 13 percent.

Tennant had 170,730 votes; DeLong came in with 119,372; and Bailey received 42,747. All the candidates trailed considerably behind DeLong as far as fundraising was concerned.

But Tennant was undaunted, saying she campaigned hard throughout the state to overcome the handicap.

"I'm certainly honored with what the voters of West Virginia have done for me and I will make them proud."

Perhaps surprisingly, Bailey, a statehouse presence for years, trailed far behind both of his opponents throughout the ballot count, though he dominated in his home county, Wyoming.

DeLong, who is House Majority Leader, conceded early that it was hopeless to think he could overcome Tennant's lead, which seemed to widen with each precinct reporting in.

But he said he was proud of his campaign.

"We ran an aggressive race," DeLong said. "We didn't go negative or anything like that."

DeLong said Tennant clearly had an advantage because of name recognition connected with an unsuccessful 2004 run for Secretary of State and her former career as a television news anchor.

DeLong said Tennant also had the advantage of being able to call Kanawha and Marion counties home since she has ties to both areas.

DeLong said he was relatively unknown outside of his delegate district, comprised of Hancock County at the northern tip of the state.

But while Tennant acknowledged she probably had some name recognition with voters, she attributed her good showing to an aggressive campaign built on substance and issues.

Tennant pointed to the 2004 race in which she lost a close election to Ken Hechler, a legendary Democratic politician in West Virginia.

"You can't dismiss my race as, 'Oh, she was on TV,'" Tennant said.

She pointed to strong support in the Eastern Panhandle, which she considered neutral ground for all the candidates.

DeLong stumped on promises to expand Internet-based government operations, protect senior citizens from fraudulent non-profit organizations and to protect privacy to lessen identity theft in the state.

Tennant, a former television reporter who currently runs a media consulting firm, campaigned heavily on issues related to improving voter confidence in elections, increasing poll worker participation and touting the importance of voting by using peer support to encourage participation in elections.

Bailey, a longtime majority whip in the state Senate, ran a relatively low-key campaign, seeming to rely heavily on name recognition. He maintained no campaign Web site, ran no television or radio ads and raised just over \$40,000. He spent \$30,941.

Minimah, a Charleston businessman and immigrant to the United States, is promising to change the state by continuing Ireland's initiatives. Minimah says he and fellow Republicans are "agents of change" who fight against corruption in the election system.

DeLong's showing was impressive when it came to fundraising. He gathered \$263,528 to Tennant's \$41,684, according to campaign finance reports kept by the Secretary of State. DeLong spent the most of all the candidates at \$282,362. Tennant spent \$41,513. DeLong loaned his campaign \$20,000. Tennant loaned her campaign \$1,730. Minimah raised only \$1,570, most of which — \$1,000 — came from Doug McKinney, the chairman of the state GOP. He spent \$8,173.

Minimah said Tuesday that he wasn't really concerned about who he would face in the general election.

"I'm looking forward to a spirited campaign," Minimah said, adding his big challenge now is to continue to introduce himself to West Virginians outside Charleston.