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Public defender runs for balance in court



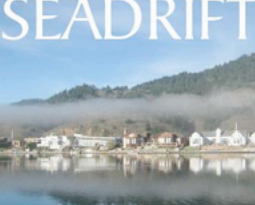
David Briggs

JUSTICE: Former West Marin resident Michael Coffino is running for a seat in Superior Court.

By Beau Evans
04/21/2016

The race for an open judge seat on Marin County Superior Court has drawn nine candidates, but one claims he has an edge. Former West Marin resident Michael Coffino says he's the only candidate with a background as a public defender—a distinction that has been lacking on the county's bench since the previous public-defender

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judge, Richard Breiner, stepped down in 1997.

The nine candidates flocked to the ballot following Judge Faye D'Opal's announcement in February that she would retire once her term ends this year. It is the first race since 2004 that an open seat has attracted such a large number of hopefuls. (That was also the year Judge D'Opal beat out seven other candidates to claim her seat.) Rare open seats offer a unique opportunity for lawyers to take a stab at joining the bench, since few people typically challenge an incumbent. This year, five other judge seats are up for election, but no candidates filed paperwork to challenge the judges, all of whom are seeking to retain their seats. Most often, California's governor appoints someone to replace a judge who steps down from the bench prior to the end of his or her term.

Twelve judges preside over Marin's Superior Court, half assigned to criminal cases and half to civil matters. Of the current judges, half were prosecutors prior to joining the bench. The rest have backgrounds in various civil practices; none were public defenders. That makes Marin the only county in the Bay Area without a judge with a public-defender history, according to Mr. Coffino. And in Marin, all four judges assigned to hear felony cases are former career prosecutors.

That longstanding lack of a public defender on the bench, Mr. Coffino argues, seems ripe for a change. "I think you want judges on your bench who have experience not just as prosecutors, but also as defense attorneys," said Mr. Coffino, who joined Marin's Public Defender's Office in 2003. "That would provide a more well-rounded perspective."

Mr. Coffino said his experience representing a wide range of clients—young and old, substance addicts, the mentally ill—would allow him to better discern whether an offender may be a fit candidate for a rehabilitative program rather than incarceration. "As a public defender, you get to know your clients—and a broad range of clients," he said. "You start to develop a pretty good sense of who's serious, who's genuine, when they say they want treatment for drug addiction, when they say they want to quit the kinds of lifestyles that led them into crime."

He has also expressed interest in establishing a satellite court in West Marin that would provide convenient access to the court system for the region's geographically isolated residents. The idea, he said, could prove cost-prohibitive, "but it's definitely something that I'd be interested in looking into. You could concentrate everyone's cases on a single day of the month. I think it would be more convenient."

Aside from Mr. Coffino, the eight other candidates include Otis Bruce, a county district attorney; Beth Jordan, a family law attorney; Sheila Lichtblau, a county counselor; Renee Marcelle, a family law attorney; Thomas McCallister, a county district attorney; Nancy McCarthy, an employment attorney; Nicole Pantaleo, a county district attorney; and David Shane, a personal injury attorney.

Like the supervisor race, one candidate must receive more than 50 percent of the vote during the June 7 primary election in order to avoid a two-person runoff on Nov. 8.



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