

Sniping by Fresno County judge hopefuls escalates

By Pablo Lopez

With one week left until voters cast ballots, the two candidates in a heated Fresno County judicial race increased their sniping Monday in what is turning out to be the nastiest local political race in the fall election.

Lisa Gamoian and Rachel Hill — who are vying for an open seat on the Fresno County Superior Court — held dueling news conferences and traded accusations about dirty campaigning.

In the morning, Hill and her supporters, who include a majority of judges on the Fresno County bench, asked her opponent to quit publishing a political advertisement in The Bee that asked voters: "Who is the real Rachel Hill?"

The ad said Hill "does not share our values and beliefs."

Hill's supporters say the ad disparages the judgeship position and gives voters a reason not to vote. "Our judicial system is not helped when there is an election such as this and the manner in which it has deteriorated," said retiring Judge Robert H. Oliver, who is supporting Hill.

Instead of attacking her, Hill urged Gamoian to campaign on her credentials and let voters decide who is the best suited to be judge. "She has her strengths. I have mine," Hill said.

In the afternoon, Gamoian told a gathering of reporters that her newspaper ad about Hill wasn't negative campaigning. "It's the truth," she said. "My opponent is trying to mislead the voters." The ad has an unflattering photo of Hill and accuses her of being critical of conservatives and FOX television news.

Gamoian's camp said the ad or similar ones will continue to publish in the days leading up to the Nov. 4 election.

Gamoian, 56, and Hill, 51, are in a face-off because they outpolled three other candidates in the June primary. Gamoian was the top vote-getter with 32,975, or 34.4% of the vote; Hill had 27,719, or 28.9%.

But Hill has received endorsements from two candidates who lost the June primary — Fresno prosecutor Jarrett Cline and administrative law Judge Steve Smith. The third candidate, Charles Magill, has declined to endorse Gamoian or Hill.

Gamoian bills herself as Fresno's No. 1 homicide prosecutor who has worked for the Fresno County District Attorney's Office for 24 years. Her supporters say she is tough and has no problem putting offenders behind bars for life or on California's death row.

Hill touts her diverse credentials that include 10 years as a Fresno prosecutor, six years as a criminal defense lawyer, four years with the Fresno law firm of McCormick Barstow and two years as adjunct law professor. Her supporters say her breadth of experience will allow her to bring a more balanced approach to the bench.

They are seeking to replace Oliver, who is retiring after nearly 20 years of service. The term is for six years. The position pays about \$178,000 a year.

Past judicial races have been nasty, but none of the previous candidates have the cash that Hill and Gamoian have spent on billboards, television and radio spots, political mailers and newspaper ads. As of late October, Hill has received more than \$422,000 in contributions; Gamoian has received more than \$417,000, election records state.

Hill's news conference was held downtown outside one of her key supporters — the Fresno Chamber of Commerce. Chamber President Al Smith told the gathering: "The recent turn of events in the judge's race have taken the

campaign to a place that we as a chamber do not feel is healthy."

Smith said the chamber gave Hill and Gamoian an equal opportunity to state their case. By a two-thirds vote, the chamber endorsed Hill, he said.

"We were impressed with her well-rounded experience," Smith said. "We think her approach is smart and it's balanced, and it will assist in stopping the revolving door at our jail."

Oliver held up two newspaper ads — one by Gamoian attacking Hill, the other by Hill touting her credentials.

"Look at both of these ads and you determine who is promoting confidence in the integrity and impartiality of the judiciary," Oliver said.

He was joined by several other judges, including M. Bruce Smith, Alan Simpson, David Gottlieb and Jane Cardoza. Former Mayor Alan Autry also spoke on behalf of Hill.

In comparison, Gamoian was surrounded mostly by family and friends (the lone exception was Fresno County Assessor Paul Dictos) at her news conference, which was held at her uncle's office at Friant Road and Fresno Street near Woodward Park. Her uncle is developer Ed Kashian, who has given his niece \$230,000 — more than half of her campaign funding, election records show.

Gamoian said she was born in Selma and is a lifelong resident of Fresno County. Hill was born in New York and came to Fresno in 1990 and is married to Fresno County Superior Court Judge Jonathan Skiles. Gamoian also said she is supported by a vast majority of law enforcement, including the Fresno and Clovis police unions, as well as the sheriff's and prosecutors unions.

"I represent the public and share the beliefs and values of Fresno County," she said.

Gamoian said it burns her to hear radio and television ads that portray Hill as a prosecutor and a "friend of a farmer."

Gamoian, who has prosecuted some of the deadliest criminals in county history, including mass murderer Marcus Wesson, said Hill did low-level cases as a prosecutor.

In addition to being a prosecutor, Gamoian said she operates her family's 40-acre farm in Selma. "Where is her evidence that she is a friend of the farmer," Gamoian said.

Gamoian also attacked Hill's credentials, saying Hill hasn't worked for two years as an attorney. In fact, Gamoian said, Hill filled out an election 700 form that lists her sole occupation as an interior designer.

Hill, however, said she has worked in the legal field for the last 24 years, including as a professor at the San Joaquin College of Law, teaching criminal and juvenile law. She said it was an oversight not to list her work as professor and as an attorney on the 700 form.

Hill has amended the form to clear up any discrepancy, her campaign manager said.

"For the last year and a half I have been focusing on teaching and doing pro-bono work," Hill said. "I'm giving back to the community. I have not been interested in how much money I am making."

Contact Pablo Lopez: plopez@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6434 or @beecourts on Twitter.

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