

Scramble for open D.A. seat begins

Four experienced contenders eyeing top prosecutorial office declare intent

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The last time Philadelphians voted for a district attorney without an incumbent on the ballot, Ronald Reagan was president and the Eagles quarterback was Ron Jaworski.

That was in 1985, and Republican Ron Castille won.

Now, with veteran D.A. Lynne Abraham retiring from the office, a scramble is under way to succeed her in next year's election.

Democratic analyst Larry Ceisler said an open district attorney's seat will attract a lot of candidates.

"It's an extremely important position, and one that can catapult a person into higher office," said Ceisler, noting that Gov. Rendell, Sen. Arlen Specter and Ron Castille, chief justice of the state supreme court, all served as D.A. in Philadelphia.

"It's really a no-lose office," Ceisler said. "Except for the case of the D.A. [Mike Nifong] who prosecuted the Duke lacrosse players, it's almost impossible to screw up as a prosecutor."

The Democratic field for D.A. lost a strong potential candidate with the nomination of Common Pleas President Judge Darnell Jones to a federal judgeship.

Among the candidates who say they're likely to run:

* Seth Williams ran in the Democratic primary in 2005, getting a respectable 44 percent of the vote against Abraham without much money or support among elected officials and ward leaders.

Since then, Williams has served as the city's inspector general. He's now in private practice but said he's been spending up to four hours a day raising money to run.

Williams served 10 years as a prosecutor in the D.A.'s office. Abraham once saw him as a potential successor, but bitterly resented his run against her.

"I've improved my visibility, and on top of my good work as an assistant D.A., as inspector general I investigated corruption, fraud and waste, and educated the public on how they can get involved," Williams said.

Some say Williams may have jeopardized potential political support with his investigation of City Councilman Curtis Thomas.

Thomas is a close ally of U.S. Rep. Chaka Fattah, an influential political leader in the city.

Abraham denounced the investigation and said Thomas was guilty of no crimes. Williams said he stands by his work in the probe, and pledged to investigate politicians when the facts warrant it.

* Daniel McCaffery, 44, an attorney and brother of state Supreme Court Justice Seamus McCaffery, said he's formed a political committee and is building support.

McCaffery said that his relationships with union leaders and political experience will make him a strong candidate.

"After I left the D.A.'s office in '96, I went to work for Democratic city committee and have been pro bono counsel for the last 12 years," McCaffery said. "I've serviced just about every elected official and ward leader, and I've been involved in every one of my brother's campaigns." "

McCaffery, who spent five years as a prosecutor, said he's still working on his "platform of ideas" for the D.A.'s office but expects to focus on gun violence, career criminals and juvenile justice.

* Michael Turner, 51, an attorney who served five years in the D.A.'s office in the 1980s, said that he's formed a committee and will likely run.

Turner has contributed to candidates, but hasn't been deeply involved in politics before. He's on the board of Valley Green Bank, based in Mount Airy, and chairs the board of Center City Crime Victims Services.

* Scott Sigman, 34, is a former prosecutor who's interested in the Republican nomination.

He shut down nuisance bars and grabbed headlines four years ago by charging a group of drug dealers with possessing weapons of mass destruction after a police search uncovered guns, grenades and an armor-piercing rocket with ammunition.

A judge tossed out the WMD charge, but Sigman said "one of my themes is that we should use every tool accessible under the law to make Philadelphia a safer and better place."

Republican party counsel Michael Meehan said several other potential candidates have contacted him "including a couple of minorities."

Racial identification in voting is usually a factor in Philadelphia elections, and district attorney is one post yet to be held by an African-American.

Apart from those actively planning their campaigns, there's been considerable buzz about Common Pleas Judge Leon Tucker entering the race as a Democrat. Tucker acknowledged that being D.A. is "something very dear to me," but said he hasn't made a decision about the race.

He would have to resign from the bench in order to run.

Municipal Judge Teresa Carr Deni acknowledged she's considered a run, but said she isn't focused on the race now. And veteran assistant D.A. John Delaney, who supervises the office's trial division, declined to comment on speculation that he might run. *