

Contentious race for District 26 heats up

Republican Matt Wingard's past, along with Democrats' voter registration push, likely to make difference in race

BY STEVE LAW

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The Oregon House seat representing Wilsonville, Sherwood, Aloha and Gaston ordinarily is safe territory for Republicans, but not this year.

The duel between Republican Matt Wingard and Democrat Jessica Adamson is turning into a barnburner, thanks to Wingard's 2001 child-abuse conviction and Democratic registration gains that halved the GOP voter edge.

Both contenders are relatively young candidates shooting for their first elective office, but with extensive political resumes. Neither has a lengthy tenure in the district. Libertarian candidate Marc Delphine also is competing for the House District 26 seat.

Wingard, 35, from Wilsonville, is a believer in limited government who consults for Portland's free-market think tank, Cascade Policy Institute, and an on-line charter school. He was a legislative committee manager one session in Salem, and ran Rob Kremer's campaign for state school superintendent.

Wingard said he'll push for expanded use of charter schools, tax credits for parents who enroll their children in private schools, and a new auditing unit overseen by lawmakers. He opposes new taxes and transportation fee increases, and says government should put money into wider highways and buses – not rail lines – to ease traffic congestion.

Adamson, 30, from Sherwood, is a business-friendly moderate who lobbies for Associated General Contractors, an influential construction trade group. She left the Republican Party a year ago, around the time she decided to enter the race, saying the GOP is no longer the party of fiscal or individual responsibility. Adamson cut her political teeth working for two moderate Republican lawmakers known for bipartisanship, Rep. Lynn Lundquist of Powell Butte and Sen. Jeannette Hamby of Hillsboro, and said she'll follow in their mold.

Adamson said she'd focus on economic development and job creation if elected. She'd seek to require competitive bidding for university construction projects, which now are exempt from such requirements, and push the resumption of occupational skills classes in secondary schools.

Child abuse conviction

So far, the ideological differences between Wingard and Adamson are being eclipsed by Wingard's child abuse conviction and related controversies stemming from coparenting a son with an estranged former girlfriend.

In a preemptive move in January, Wingard notified newspaper editorial boards of his 2001 child abuse conviction and thick court file. He was indicted by a Clackamas County grand jury on two felony



JAIME VALDEZ / PAMPLIN MEDIA GROUP

Democrat Jessica Adamson of Sherwood, left, and Republican Matt Wingard of Wilsonville, are locked in a tight battle for the state's House District 26 seat. Wingard's past legal troubles could play a part in the election outcome.

counts and one misdemeanor, after his son's doctor reported suspected child abuse to authorities. In a plea agreement, Wingard pled guilty to one misdemeanor conviction for fourth-degree assault. He completed community service and anger management classes, and his parental rights were suspended, for what turned out to be three years.

Wingard, in an appearance before Pamplin editors and reporters this week, teared-up as he sought to portray his side of the story. He said he momentarily lost his temper and struck his then 7-year-old son with a screwdriver handle. "I thumped him on the head," he said. "It gave him a lump."

Wingard said he could have walked away from his son when his former girlfriend, Margaret Stacy Pico, tried to deny him contact, but he said he wanted to be a responsible father.

Wingard denied all the other allegations made by Pico in a 2004 affidavit, which she filed when Wingard sought to reinstate visitation rights for their then 10-year-old son.

Pico alleged a long pattern of emotionally and physically abusive parenting, and included doctor's notes that listed injuries to their son after he returned from weekend visits with Wingard. The doctors' reports cite bruises to the boy's legs and other body parts, and more than one instance where the son reported being slapped in the face.

In the affidavit, Pico also described a pattern of authoritarian parenting by Wingard. She accused him of forcefeeding their son to the point of vomiting when he wouldn't eat; holding him tightly against his chest to get him to stop crying; and locking him in a dark stairwell to get over his fear of the dark.

Wingard said all those charges were false, aside from the one incident he admitted to in the plea bargain.

After Wingard divulged his past conviction, the House Republican political action committee distanced itself from him and sought to recruit another GOP candidate for the May primary. But when none emerged, the House Republicans embraced Wingard's candidacy.

Last month, Wingard won an interim appointment to the District 26 House seat, vacated when incumbent Rep. Jerry Krummel, R-Wilsonville, resigned to take a job in Nevada. Clackamas and Washington county commissioners were obliged to pick a Republican for the open slot, and no other serious candidates emerged.

Without controversy, 'he wins'

The House Democrats' political action committee is trying to capitalize on the child abuse issue, circulating copies of the court files and sending a mailer to voters' homes that reads in large letters: "Vote no to child abuse. Vote no on Matt Wingard."

Adamson didn't produce the flyer but doesn't take issue with it.

"I think this election is about character," Adamson said. "His actions aren't in line with the community I know and love."

Democrats say Wingard is trying to minimize his behavior by depicting it as a one-time aberration.

"I just don't think that Matt is telling the whole story," said Michele Rossolo, who runs Future PAC, the House Democrats' political arm.

"He's clearly deceiving the voters," she said.

Nick Smith, spokesman for the House Republicans' political committee, said the flyer was unfair. "It's disgraceful that Adamson would resort to these intensely personal attacks and distract the voters in this race," he said. "There are other issues that we believe voters are concerned about."

Cathy Shaw, a Democratic political consultant from Ashland and author of a college textbook on political campaigning, said she ordinarily cautions candidates to stay away from personal attacks. But this issue is different, Shaw said, and Wingard was convicted.

"There's a whole different level of judgment that we as a society have for someone who raises his hand against a child," she said. "If this were a neighbor whispering gossip, that would be different."

Paul Phillips, a Republican political consultant from Tigard, said child abuse is a legitimate issue to raise, but he questioned the flyer sent by Democrats, and said it might backfire.

"I think without this controversy, he wins going away. I don't care how much money she has," Phillips said. "I think the most fascinating part of this race is, can a Republican-turned-Democrat right before this race be able to convince all the newly registered Democrats to vote for her because the Republican is tainted."

stevelaw@portlandtribune.com

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