

Prominent Milwaukee Criminal Defense Attorney Runs Against Evers-Appointed Washington County Judge

By Mark Belling, WISN-AM

A well-known local criminal defense attorney, who purports to be a conservative, is running for Washington County Circuit Judge next spring against incumbent Ryan Hetzel, one of two judges appointed to the bench in the county in the past year by Democrat Governor Tony Evers.

The challenger, Russell Jones, is a high profile local criminal defense attorney based in Milwaukee but who lives in Slinger in Washington County. Jones, despite spending his career representing accused crooks, claims he is a conservative and says if elected he will fight to oppose judicial activists.

Even though Washington County (the West Bend-Slinger-Richfield area) is the most conservative county in the state, all four of its current sitting circuit judges were appointed by Democrat governors and one was recently elected to a full term without any opposition. I have strongly criticized the Washington County GOP for not recruiting challengers to liberal Democrat judges. The county is currently seeking, via referendum, a property tax increase to fund more law enforcement positions. I have argued such an increase is pointless so long as the county's judges keep showing leniency toward accused and convicted criminals.

Hetzel, the incumbent Jones is opposing, recently released an accused felon on low bail who immediately went on to allegedly commit new crimes. He is certainly vulnerable to a conservative challenger but it is unclear, for now at least, just how "conservative" Jones is.

Another judge appointed this year to the Washington County bench by Evers, Michael Kenitz, so far is unopposed as he runs for a full term next spring. Kenitz recently ruled against Evers in ordering Evers' Parole Commission to release public records on all of the individuals the agency has freed this year.

A third Washington County judge, Sandie Giernoth, was appointed by Evers in 2020 and elected to a full term a year later. The fourth judge is only the veteran of the foursome, James Muehlbauer. He was appointed by Democrat Governor Jim Doyle in 2007 and has run without opposition since.

By contrast, virtually all judges appointed in liberal Dane and Milwaukee counties by Governor Scott Walker were opposed and defeated when running for full terms. Waukesha County voters last year defeated an Evers appointee to the circuit court and an Evers appointee to the state Court of Appeals from the conservative southeast Wisconsin court district also lost this spring. Washington County seems to be the outlier that is perfectly fine with liberal Democrats naming the county's judges.

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