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Veteran law enforcer first to announce candidacy for county sheriff

Dave Willis says “public safety, not politics” is his motto

A 21-year veteran of the Macomb County Sheriff’s Office hopes he has a head start on winning the sheriff’s position if — as widely believed — current Sheriff Mark Hackel is elected county executive in the November elections.

Sgt. Dave Willis, an afternoon shift commander, on Monday filed paperwork at the Macomb County Clerk’s Office to establish a political committee to run for sheriff.

“I’ve been waiting a long time for this day,” Willis said. “I had always dreamed of being in law enforcement and working for the sheriff’s department, which I’ve done my entire adult life. I can do the job.”

Willis, 43, of Center Line, a married father of two, said he wanted to get an early start on the potential sheriff’s race in order to get his name out before voters.

Hackel is the Democratic candidate for the first-ever county executive position that voters will select on Nov. 2. He faces Randell Shafer, a retired Army officer who upset Simon Haddad for the Republican nomination in last week’s primary election.

Many political observers predict Hackel will coast to the executive slot. If he does win in the November election and take office Jan. 1, 2011, he would have to resign as sheriff, opening the door to what is expected to be a wide array of candidates.

The county Elections Commission — consisting of Macomb Circuit Judge Mark Switalski, Macomb Prosecutor Eric Smith and Macomb Clerk Carmella Sabaugh — would appoint an interim sheriff to oversee the department until the next county election in 2012.

Among the names being talked about in political circles for the sheriff’s job are county Commissioner Phil DiMaria, Eastpointe police Chief Michael Lauretti and Utica police Chief Michael Reeves.

Also thought to be in the running are several current sheriff’s office officials including Undersheriff Kent Lagerquist, Capt. Tony Wickersham, Capt. Brenda Baker, Detective Lt. Liz Darga, and jail administrator Michelle Sanborn.

The sheriff Monday said he is not ready to make an endorsement until there is a vacancy in the position.

“It would be irresponsible of me not to make a recommendation and I will do so when the time is right, but right now it’s inappropriate of me to say anything about anyone,”

Hackel said.

Willis, the son of retired Mount Clemens Detective Sgt. David Willis and Angela Willis, director of the Macomb County Senior Citizens Services, served as treasurer for the county charter commission.

If he becomes sheriff, Willis said one of his top priorities will be to create a citizens advisory council to gauge the public's opinion of services and issues.

"My slogan is 2011 and beyond is about public safety, not politics," Willis said.