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Arkansas Democrat Gazette

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS EDITION

Political passions pursued

Pat Lynch

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There have been significant

developments in the hotly contested race

for justice of the peace in western Pulaski County, which occupied a significant portion of our visit last week. It is worth noting, too, that the race for governor is tightening and becoming somewhat more interesting. Hang on tight. This could be a wild ride. Let us begin where emotions are running high. In the key Pulaski County JP faceoff, challenger Allen Kerr showed up at my front door Tuesday and, remarkably, was able to correctly identify both the resident and the pet by name. Kerr also claims to own a beagle, an assertion that has yet to be independently verified. True or not, you have to hand it to the man for wanting to make a good impression.

Meanwhile, at the Kathy Lewison war room, faxes buzzed and computers hummed along while the incumbent studied photographs of local celebrities. Buddy Villines is the one with the gray beard. David Bazzel has the dazzling white teeth. (Bazzel rhymes with dazzle.) Pat Lynch has the thinning white hair.

Seeking her third term on the Pulaski County Quorum Court, Lewison has composed a carefully nuanced, handwritten note to Lynch's beagle, Molly. The candidate's calculated presumption is that any political columnist who mentions his dog by name in the newspaper will probably fall for such a shamelessly cheesy stunt. Of course, she's right.

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Our candidates for governor have some intensity but little of the passion so apparent in the battleground of Quorum Court politics. In the joint appearance last week, Mike Beebe gave a totally lame excuse about how the proponents of a 2002 initiative to repeal the sales tax on groceries did not provide for an alternative source of revenue and that is why he was somehow obliged to oppose it.

Let us dispense with such nonsense. It is the General Assembly's job to raise taxes. Democrat Beebe at the time was part of the well-established coalition of entrenched special interests whose foremost constituency is always themselves.

Asa Hutchinson did little better. The former Republican congressman turned bureaucrat turned lobbyist turned gubernatorial candidate was a resident of Virginia while the rest of us voted on whether to get the sales tax off groceries. It's obvious to even the most devoted Hutchinson fan that he was passed over to head Homeland Security. It is legitimate to wonder if being governor of Arkansas is, in fact, his career preference.

If the debate was a draw, and that is the conventional wisdom, then the advantage has to be with the outsider, Hutchinson. That little outing in Jonesboro certainly did him no harm, and it probably did him some good.

Hutchinson has two advantages as we enter the final six weeks of this political season. First, there is Beebe's lack of campaign experience. Since public opinion polls generally show the race tightening, and with two "third party" candidates splitting up Beebe's base, a rookie mistake could be costly. The second advantage for Hutchinson is the payday-lenders issue.

At first glance, this may look like a small matter of a \$ 200 donation from some outfit in Hot Springs. In fact, Attorney General Beebe has sued payday lenders and put several out of business, so his public record has some important accomplishments.

But the nagging question remains about other donations coming from more indirect sources that bear the markings of an exploitative class of businesses. This is all about the influence of special interests and Beebe's coziness with highdollar manipulators. Keep an eye on this one and remember that Beebe could easily be defeated.

The candidates for lieutenant governor, Democrat Bill Halter and Republican state Sen. Jim Holt, also had a joint meeting, this one before students and journalists at the Clinton School of Public Service.

Holt is a fine man who holds a number of sincerely held and generally impractical beliefs. Later in the week, Halter decided to

emphasize Holt's record on public education, which, according to Halter, includes a proposed constitutional amendment to end the state's obligation to fund public schools. Unfortunately for Halter, there are those who agree with Holt's somewhat idealized views. The good news is that Arkansas does not need a lieutenant governor, and there is growing discussion as to whether we actually require a governor. This much, however, is sure: It is the JPs who keep the jails open.

-----•-----Free-lance columnist Pat Lynch has been a radio broadcaster in Central Arkansas for more than 20 years.

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