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Democrats hope to pick up House seat over conservative Hood Lancaster Eagle Gazette (Lancaster, OH) July 3, 2004 Saturday

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HEADLINE: Democrats hope to pick up House seat over conservative Hood

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COLUMBUS -- Ron Hood shocked some local GOP leaders and even surprised himself by winning the March primary and earning the chance to succeed Speaker Larry Householder in the 91st House district.

But his win has Democrats hoping for an upset of their own in November.

Hood, 35, lived in the district for just a few months before the March primary but still managed to knock off three opponents, including Fred Hawk, the former Hocking County commissioner backed by Householder to take over the open seat in 2005.

"He moved right into this district and took over like you wouldn't believe," said Rod Hedges, chairman of the Hocking County GOP.

Hedges used county GOP money to help Hawk.

"We worked really hard against Ron," Hedges said, acknowledging there was some making up to do after the election.

"I just still can't believe the district would support somebody who just moved in. You'd think they'd want somebody who was born and raised here."

But in a four-county district, no one gets a hometown advantage, said Hood, a former state representative from suburban Youngstown. The district includes all of Perry and Hocking counties, the southern portion of Licking County and the eastern third of Pickaway County.

The counties have little, if any, connection to one another, Hood said.

"(Hawk) won his county, but just because a candidate has lived there all his life, doesn't mean he knows anything about Licking County," he said. "He's as new to Licking County as I am."

Nonetheless, having just moved in, Hood initially doubted his chances.

"At the time we didn't feel like we had that great of a chance to win," he said. "But we felt if we talked about issues and what we believed in, and people agreed with that, maybe we would have a shot."

HOOD UNDER FIRE

Hawk, Hood's top opponent, got help from Columbus, where Householder's political team provided mailings and fund raising.

Hood was even attacked in a mailing that ripped his previous legislative record, saying he "was completely ineffective" and "failed to support funding for our schools."

"It surprised most people that one Republican would attack another Republican so viciously," Hood said. "They felt they needed to attack me in the race in order to win."

Hood fired back with his own mailing, saying the "slick party bosses and bureaucrats at the Statehouse are desperate" and

looking for "yes men."

Hawk defended the negative mailing.

"The only thing you can ask on that is 'Is it accurate? Does it accurately portray the situation?' Well, yeah," Hawk said. "That's something I think the voters are entitled to know."

Scott Pullins, president of the Ohio Taxpayers Association and a political consultant for Hood, thinks too much of Hawk's campaign was run out of Columbus.

"Fred Hawk had some high-level support and had been a county commissioner," he said. "Some folks think that's enough to win. Sometimes it is.

"If he were running against a bunch of folks who didn't know what they were doing, he would have won."

Pullins said people underestimated Hood, who talked about reforming taxes, restraining budget growth, and his conservative stance on issues such as guns and abortion. He fell back on past supporters to help him raise about \$40,000.

"What separated me from the other candidates is ... I have a record to show I will make these stands, when these other candidates, you don't really know what they're going to do with these issues," Hood said.

Hawk, who said he never heard of Hood before the primary, said Hood ran an effective mail and phone campaign, particularly in Licking County, which holds the highest concentration of voters.

If he had more time, Hawk thinks he could have won the race.

"I just think if folks got the chance to look at the candidates, they might have drawn a different conclusion," he said.

DEMS EYE SEAT

As a state representative from Mahoning County from 1995 to 2000, Hood cultivated his reputation as a right-wing ideologue. He never voted for a state budget, complaining his colleagues were spending too much. He pushed hard for a bill giving Ohioans unfettered access to handguns, and another that could break down union memberships, which he argues will bring jobs to Ohio.

His uncompromising stance on issues didn't earn him many friends, even among fellow Republicans. But that never bothered Hood, who said he is more concerned with standing up for his principles than making deals.

Democrat Dan Dodd of Buckeye Lake, who is facing Hood in November, thinks he can exploit some of Hood's hard stances.

The 26-year-old attorney is making his first foray into politics and believes he can go toe-to-toe with Hood on social issues -- he is pro-life, supportive of carrying handguns and opposed to gay marriage. At the same time, he hopes to convince voters he's the better choice in areas of education funding and standing up for workers.

Dodd has gotten some advice from Rep. John Bocchieri, D-New Middletown, who unseated Hood in 2000.

"Ron Hood beat himself," Bocchieri said. "He was a legislator who didn't legislate."

Dodd thinks Hood won in March because people didn't know enough about his record at the Statehouse, such as his votes against education funding increases and his support of privately run charter schools.

"What that's doing is taking money that could be going to schools and sending it to private companies," Dodd said. "I don't think there's a good explanation as to why that's a good idea, especially if those schools aren't even in our district.

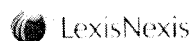
"If I let people know what I'm about and what Ron's about, I should win."

There is speculation that Hawk may actually endorse Dodd, instead of fellow Republican Hood. When asked, Hawk said, "I don't know. You never want to say never."

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