

PRIMARY PROVES PYRAMID POWER

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The August 30th primary election verified the role played by an informal East Volusia cabal of business and civic leaders GovStuff profiled in a July 21 report identifying them as the area's Power Pyramid.

A combination of significant funding and "spreading the word" brought solid results for most candidates the Report identified as enjoying backing from the loosely structured Pyramid. Sudden shifts in support and a "go it alone" push by one or two Pyramid members underline the flexibility of the group. You can review the July 21 Report by clicking [here](#).

Sheriff's Race an Anomaly: Daytona Beach Police Chief Mike Chitwood topped a field of five with more than 50% of the votes cast to win in the Primary. In doing so he bucked both the Pyramid choice and conventional wisdom. The race was an anomaly for these reasons:

1. When incumbent Sheriff Ben Johnson announced he would not seek re-election, Chief Deputy Eric Dietrich announced his candidacy and quickly drew Pyramid backing, the majority from Daytona International Speedway sources.
2. Johnson endorsed and campaigned for Dietrich.
3. The Volusia Republican Party, which endorses and supports candidates in legally non-partisan races, jumped in to back Dietrich and Sheriff's Captain Dave Bannon. The deputies union threw support to Brannon. The Democratic Party appeared to split support between them.

When Chitwood jumped into the race after it was well underway, loyalties (or potential business interests) were tested. By June 1 he had received \$4,650 in support, mainly from beachside business interests of George Anderson and Theresa Doan, but including \$1,500 from Speedway patriarchs, the late Betty Jane France and her brother-in-law Jim France. By summer the 10 years of near daily headlines boosting name recognition and record of progress in the DBPD had created obvious momentum for Chitwood and Dietrich's Pyramid support largely evaporated. He did continue to pull in numerous small individual contributions for a total of more than \$180,000, topping Chitwood's \$118,281. In the June-Primary period, Pyramid related support for Chitwood topped that for Dietrich – \$10,000+ to \$250. No Speedway related support for Dietrich was evident, but it did not overtly support Chitwood, the bulk of whose Pyramid funding was generated by interests linked to Mori Hosseini.

County Chair: The County Chair is a figurehead position, where the occupant often acts as mouthpiece for the County Manager. In a field of four, Ormond Beach Mayor Ed Kelley missed the 50%+1 needed for an outright win by 3 points. Incumbent Jason Davis made it to a November 8 runoff with 17% of the votes. Giving a nod to incumbency, Pyramid members led by Mori Hosseini gave Davis a total of \$6,000 through the Primary, while supporting Kelley to the tune of more than \$22,000. Of Davis' 35 contributions over the summer, 49% came from supporters with addresses outside Volusia County. Roughly half of Kelley's Pyramid-related support came from organizations connected to Hosseini, who appears to be hedging his bets while other Pyramid members like the Speedway and Brown and Brown interests are holding off or have structured support so as to be hard to identify.

Property Appraiser: Larry Bartlett had solid Power Pyramid support (\$28,900), and a six to one fund raising advantage over two opponents in the race to succeed retiring long-term appraiser Morgan Gilreath. Yet he held only a one point lead over Alan Burton, who he will face in the November election. Vigorous Republican Party support for Burton in the non-partisan race and name recognition from prior campaigns likely contributed to the 130 vote difference and make the Pyramid members ability to get voters to pick Bartlett in what is likely to be a high November turn-out a test of their ability.

Supervisor of Elections: Lisa Lewis received Pyramid support as she sought election as Supervisor of Elections to which she had been appointed earlier in the year when long-time supervisor Ann McFall retired. As McFall's Chief Deputy, Lewis had established a reputation for efficiency and as a people person among those doing business with the office. With financial and networking help from the Pyramid and a groundswell of countywide support she handily topped three opponents, winning with 64% of the vote.

County Council – District 2: Billie Wheeler was not in the Primary, as she and perennial candidate Willie Kimmons are the only contenders for County Council District 2. From the time of her 2015 announcement to the primary, Wheeler received Pyramid-related money totaling \$56,200, or 68% of the total \$82,860 reported. Kimmons has reported contributions of \$8,887 for the year. While Wheeler has attracted support on a county-wide basis, the people who count in this race are 72,000 voters of District Two in Daytona Beach, South Daytona and Daytona Beach Shores, Ponce Inlet and unincorporated areas.

County Council – District 4: When the GovStuff report on the Power Pyramid was published District Four Candidate Al Smith was the only one in this race receiving Pyramid support -- \$30,450 of the \$33,500 he had raised

through June 1 could be traced to Pyramid sources. But something happened along the way, and in the June-Primary period support linked to the pyramid shifted to Heather Post, a veteran Volusia deputy sheriff whose career came to an end in 2011 when she resigned as part of a \$44,000 settlement with the County over an EEOC complaint alleging she had been subjected to a hostile work environment and gender discrimination. She earlier had been terminated by the Sheriff for alleged untruths told during an internal affairs investigation of earlier discrimination claims. Since leaving the Sheriff's Department, Post has operated a motivational company which describes her as a "body language/ protocol/ professional development expert." From June through the Primary, while Smith reported 53 contributions totaling a little over \$22,000, including \$4,000 directly attributable to Pyramid members, Post reported 141 contributions totaling \$67,208 of which \$28,600 came from Pyramid members or those associated with them. Post led the way to a November run-off with 43% of the votes in a five person field, to be joined by Smith with 28%. The race will be settled by the 70,000 voters in District 4, which includes the northwestern quadrant of Daytona Beach through Holly Hill, Ormond Beach and unincorporated Volusia to the Flagler County line. A number of key Halifax Health officials, including CEO Jeff Feasel, CFO Eric Peburn, Foundation Director Joe Petrock and physicians affiliated with Halifax Health have given support to Smith, whose father was a popular member of the Halifax Medical staff, which, along with endorsements he claims from losing primary candidates who totaled 27% of that vote, may add more interest to the general election vote.

As with the original GovStuff Report, it should be noted that support attributed to the members and outreach of the Pyramid, which has no formal structure or existence, is speculative and may be incomplete. What is certain that these are people for whom investing in politics is and everyday part of their business lives. People who talk with each other regularly, compare notes on which officials and which projects are most likely to benefit their business interests. There is nothing wrong with this, although when a candidate, as Al Smith did on a recent *GovStuff Live!* program, says he was told he lost Pyramid member support because "everybody liked me, but I know too much, I'm too much of an independent thinker," the degree of influence exerted can be questioned. GovStuff points to the Pyramid's involvement in the political process because it *is* extensive and *can* affect the quality and cost of life we all share. And because *OUR* involvement in the process should be as important as theirs.

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