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The Perennials

Minneapolis elections have often been frequented by recurrent candidates. Thanks to the city's new voting system, many will see their names on the ballot for the first time Tuesday.



Mayoral candidate Dick Franson campaigns in Midtown on Saturday, a few days before Election Day. This is Franson's fifth time running for Mayor of Minneapolis.

AMY GEE

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BY BRIANA BIERSCHBACH

At 7 a.m. on a brisk October morning, 80-year-old Vietnam veteran Dick Franson stood outside of Minneapolis City Hall next to a faded campaign sign he used in a 1993 run for mayor.

"I saw this in the garage this morning and I thought, heck, it still works," Franson said.

As Franson approached passersby with campaign literature promoting himself for mayor of Minneapolis, some took the pamphlets politely while others ignored him. One person told Franson he shouldn't be soliciting outside of City Hall.

Franson didn't seem to care.



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“It’s my God given right to run for office,” he said, “and I love every minute of it.”

re-election

Some Minneapolis residents might be familiar with Franson by now, at least as a notorious perennial candidate.

Franson was the Ward 12 Alderman in Minneapolis City Hall from 1963 to 1965 and he’s been trying to get back into public office ever since. This year’s run for mayor marks Franson’s 25th attempt to capture a political position, including four other runs for mayor of Minneapolis, four runs for U.S. Congress, six runs for U.S. Senate and multiple attempts at Secretary of State.

But this election could be his best shot.

Franson’s name will be on the ballot for the first time since the 1960s thanks to instant runoff voting, a new voting system that will debut in Minneapolis’ Tuesday election. The system allows voters to rank candidates by preference and eliminates the need for a primary, which has preemptively eliminated Franson before the November election for the last 40 years.

Franson’s name is only one in a long list of perennial candidates who are getting their first chance on the ballot.

For some returning candidates, running for office repeatedly is less about winning and more about championing issues they feel are lost in the political fray. For others, the love of the campaign keeps them coming to the polls year after year.

For Franson, he thinks this year could be the year he gets back to City Hall.

A perennial-loaded ballot

Bill McGaughey, a Minneapolis mayoral candidate, made a run for president of the United States in the Louisiana primary in 2004, finishing fifth among seven candidates.

Running for mayor does not seem minor in comparison, he said.

McGaughey also ran for mayor of Minneapolis in 2001, for the U.S. Senate in 2002 and last year against Rep. Keith Ellison for state representative of the fifth district of Minnesota.

Each time he had key issues that he wished to champion, regardless of the platform.

Over the years, McGaughey has focused on economic and trade issues and continually backed a shorter work week.

Despite what happens in Minneapolis on Nov. 3, McGaughey said he is just happy share his ideas with the public.

McGaughey remains optimistic that he could win the race for mayor, but admits that this may be his best and last chance.

“I’m getting up in years. I’m 68 and my wife doesn’t like politics,” he said. “At some point we will have to figure out how we are going to live the rest of our lives.”

Tom Fiske , an ardent socialist running for Minneapolis mayor, has also run his fair share of campaigns.

This is Fiske’s first run for a position in Minneapolis, but the perennial candidate has made multiple attempts to capture a political office, including a 1998 run for governor of Minnesota and a 1996 run for U.S. Senate.

“It’s not about getting elected. It’s about helping to build the struggles of working people; that is the most important thing,” Fiske said. “Ultimately, working people need to build a revolutionary movement.”

Movement building has been the long-time business of Dave Bicking, a candidate making his second attempt at winning the Ward 9 Minneapolis council seat . But Bicking’s philosophy for most of his life has been protest, not politics.

Bicking is concerned with what he sees as a power grab by the mayor and council, first by eliminating the Library Board and the Neighborhood Revitalization Program, and recent attempts to dissolve the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board and the Board of Estimate and Taxation.

Bicking has been a peace activist since the Vietnam War, and is on the board of the Minneapolis Civilian Police Review Authority , an oversight commission for the city’s police department.

“There are so many instances where there really is a need for people to stand up, and a lot of times it’s, ‘Well if I don’t do it, who’s going to do it?’” Bicking said.

Campaigning, however, is not the same as protesting for Bicking.

“In the end, building movements is more important and powerful than electoral politics,” he said, “and very few people have the money and flexibility in their work to do this.”

Michael Cavlan, a registered nurse, somehow finds time in his busy schedule to run a campaign for Ward 8. But Cavlan has experience balancing his nurse duties with candidacy.

Cavlan ran on the Green Party ticket for state representative in 2002 and U.S. Senate in 2006. He tried to get on the ballot for U.S. Senate in 2008 as a write-in candidate.

While Cavlan is no longer running with the Green Party — he switched to the new Minnesota Open Progressive party for council elections — his goal has remained the same: give voters a box to check other than Democrat and Republican.

“The most important thing to get is an understanding of just how absolutely corrupt the two-party system is,” he said. “We need to show that there are other options and that we need to build those options if we are going to move forward in society.”

A tenacious contender

Franson had one fan that morning in front of City Hall.

“Hey, Dick Franson, candidate for mayor of Minneapolis,” Franson said as he flagged down a young man about to enter the building. The man took Franson’s campaign literature and looked at the backside, which featured a large image of the uniformed veteran in front of an American flag.

“Hey, you kind of look like Jimmy Carter,” the man said. “I like you!”

“Heck yeah!” Franson replied, a remark he utters so often that it seems to be his catch phrase.

His campaign slogan, however, is much longer.

“Taxpayers must rise up and clean house by defeating all 13 city council members and the present milquetoast Mayor R.T. Rybak for neglecting the proper maintenance of our bridges, sewers, streets, public buildings and parks,” his slogan reads in bold on his campaign literature.

Franson's nickname for current Minneapolis mayor R.T. Rybak is "Raising Taxes Reebok."

"He has proposed raising taxes by 11.2 percent," Franson said. "We cannot afford Rybak and the other city council members. It is outrageous!"

Franson has also pledged to work for \$1 a year and donate his entire salary as mayor of Minneapolis to the "homeless and the indigents," he said.

He would get by on his pensions, he said, which have supported him and his campaigns over the years.

Unlike other mayoral candidates, Franson does most of his campaign work himself with the help of one volunteer, Leslie Davis, who checks Franson's campaign e-mails.

Franson has a fax machine, but not a computer.

"My typewriter is my word processor and I've been using that for 20 years," Franson said. "I usually fax 350 messages a month. There are 400 newspapers in the state of Minnesota, you know."

Davis said he appreciates the candidate's patriotism.

"He's just a good military guy," Davis said, admitting that he probably wouldn't vote for Franson for mayor.

Davis, a perennial candidate himself who is running as a Republican for governor of Minnesota, doesn't agree with many of the DFL candidate's ideas, especially Franson's view that Minneapolis should use the National Guard in high crime areas, Davis said.

"I probably wouldn't vote for him based on that alone," he said.

Perennials in Minnesota history

Harold Stassen, the 25th governor of Minnesota, has also taken a place in pop culture and history as "the perennial candidate."

While Stassen's 19 attempts at office don't quite reach the 68 lost elections by Canadian and current Guinness World Records holder John Turmel, his persistent runs for office were high profile.

In addition to four runs for governor of Minnesota, two for governor of Pennsylvania, two for U.S. Senate and various other offices, Stassen attempted to get the Republican nomination for president nine times between 1948 and 1992.

Stassen was considered a serious candidate in 1948 and 1952, but his attempts were increasingly met with ridicule and ultimately amusement as years went by.

While he did have a successful tenure as president of the University of Pennsylvania, Stassen died at age 93 without getting on the ballot.

Many know Eugene McCarthy as a long-time state representative in the U.S. House of Representatives, where he served from 1949 to 1959, and the U.S. Senate from 1959 to 1971.

He also ran for president five times, once almost successfully.

In the 1968 presidential election, McCarthy was the first candidate to challenge incumbent Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic nomination for president.

He received an unexpectedly high number of votes in the New Hampshire primary, which ultimately led Johnson to withdraw from the race. It also lured Robert Kennedy into the contest, who eventually beat McCarthy in the primary.

Many candidates who have held federal office first faced a record of failed elections, Jon Krosnick, an expert in politics and psychology at Stanford University, said.

“There are many indications that losing shouldn’t mean you shouldn’t run again,” he said, adding that many candidates learn what works and what doesn’t during a campaign as they continually run.

Running over and over also builds name recognition, he said.

“It’s the American way to try and try again,” he said. “Society would never survive if people didn’t try, success would never happen.”

Many perennials run repeatedly because they believe they have a unique voice that, if they don’t run, will not be represented, said Larry Jacobs, director of the University of Minnesota’s Center for the Study of Politics and Governance.

“I think there are very passionate beliefs that underlie many perennials,” he said.

However, ego and the allure of having “adoring campaign workers and supporters” is also a driving factor for some candidates, he said.

Troy Parker, a candidate running for the second time against long-time councilwoman Barbara Johnson in Ward 4, said he has a problem with candidates who “decide every year that they want to run for a different position.”

“It just seems like they want to hold political office,” he said, adding that he has run for the Ward 4 twice because he cares about the issues specifically in the area.

A winning year

With a 12-point plan for mayor of Minneapolis and an enthusiasm for politics, Franson thinks this year might be the year he finally takes a seat in the mayor’s office.

“No one else has a 12-point plan. I think that should be required if you’re running for mayor. You should have to spell out what you are going to do for the city,” Franson said. “I’m the most direct guy that has ever run for public office. Don’t give me that pie in the sky stuff.”

Franson said he has a good chance to win the election Tuesday, especially with campaign-quiet incumbent Rybak “just playing games” this election, he said. If Franson doesn’t win, he said he will rank number two on the ballot.

“Anytime I meet somebody I normally convince them to vote for me,” he said.

While the love of campaigning and politics is a major driving factor, ultimately, Franson doesn’t think the candidates are discussing the “issues of the day.”

“If [the other candidates] don’t talk about the issues of the day then I’ll always be a candidate,” Franson said. “If they really talked about the issues of the day, then I would quit, but I’ll run for mayor until I’m 100 until they do.”

In the event that he isn’t elected, Franson has plans to run for Secretary of State in 2010.

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