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BEC fair full of GOP, DFL & IP

Area politicians try to get name recognition amongst carnivals, barns

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GARDEN CITY - In odd-numbered years, visitors to the Blue Earth County Fair can go home with blue ribbons, a stomach stuffed with mini-donuts and a faint odor of manure on their clothes. In even-numbered years, they can add a fistful of political brochures to the list.

Fairs attract politicians like livestock barns attract flies. The oak-shaded Garden City fairgrounds was awash with candidates this week, and fair-goers received fair warning before they even got to the front gate.

A grove of "Tony Cornish for State Representative" signs and several "Julie Rosen for State Senate" placards and a single "Tim Hage for State Senate" poster lined the final block leading to the fairgrounds.

An early coup for the Republicans and Hage, who's running as an Independence Party candidate...

Cornish, who graduated from the old Garden City High School, knew that the road would be a prime location for political signs.

"That's the only way in, and sometimes the line gets backed up," Cornish said.

The signs boost name recognition and leave voters with a feeling that the candidate must be hustling, said Cornish, R-Good Thunder.

In the fair's commercial building, both the Republicans and the Democrats had booths set up with brochures for candidates from U.S. Senate to local legislative races.

On the east side of the building, Sandy Lorenz was staffing the DFL booth. Cornish's opponent, Lorenz admitted to not enjoying that final hundred yards driving into the fairgrounds.

"My heart kind of sank when I saw that...", she conceded. "The name of the game is name [recognition]."

But Lorenz's heart wasn't sinking when she showed off her own attention-getter - a bright orange Volkswagen Thing covered with matching "Lorenz" signs. The strange open-topped safari-type vehicle, produced for just three years by VW, was in the fairgrounds parking lot where a lot of attendees at today's motorcycle races will drive by it.

"I figure one look at that counters about 20 signs," Lorenz said.

On the opposite side of the building, Rosen was working at the GOP booth. County fairs are just another opportunity to reach potential voters, added to the door-to-door approach in towns and the parade-walking in community festivals.

"A lot of people still come to fairs," said Rosen, R-Fairmont. "Fairs are still a big deal in rural America."

Fowler, her opponent, was just a few feet away. It's a good place to meet people, but it's also a nice diversion in a long campaign.

"I'm from a farm, grew up on a farm, and they can never take that away from you..." said Fowler, DFL-Fairmont. "I just like the fairs. And I like the food ... corn dogs, onion rings, all the things you shouldn't eat."

Blue Earth County Board candidates Katy Wortel of Mankato, Bill James of Garden City and Al Bennett of Lake Crystal were also set up, Wortel and James with booths in the commercial building and Bennett with a trailer outside.

"Right now I'm just trying to get my name out there," said James, a retired county recorder who's running against Bennett.

Unlike some of the flashy brochures produced by the candidates for the major parties, James had a simple card with biographical information.

"I couldn't see going to a lot of expense with pictures and all that because you know when people get home, it's going in the waste basket," he said. "But after the primary [election], I'm going to give it hell."

Bennett's trailer has Culligan bottled water attached to the side with a sign offering free relief for people looking to slake their thirst. There were also a couple of large signs reminding folks in District 4 to vote for him.

The signs don't always come to the fair, but Bennett is there with the free water every year - even non-election years.

"For me, it's part of my job," Bennett said. "See the voters, give them a chance to talk to me whether it's positive or negative. It's been a good sounding board."

People who otherwise shy away from talking to Bennett about county issues when they see him, apparently because they're too busy or worry that he is, will delve into issues at the fair.

"I have people who will talk to me no place else but here..." he said. "It seems to be an environment where they're more comfortable."