Write-in who closed Martin/Palm Beach District 82 seat donated to another candidate

By Jonathan Mattise

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MARTIN COUNTY — Six candidates will vie for a Martin-Palm Beach seat in one of Florida's most crowded state house races, but more than half the district's voters will have virtually no say in who wins.

When a write-in contender qualified Friday alongside five GOP competitors, House District 82 Democrats and independents lost their chance to vote in a decisive August GOP primary.

That write-in qualifier donated money to one of the other five candidates.

Anyone can vote in primaries when all the candidates are from the same party, since that election will determine the overall winner. But by law, when write-ins file, only the represented party's voters can cast primary ballots.

Beverly Joy Hires of Tequesta, a write-in who has donated to fellow District 82 candidate MaryLynn Magar's campaign, said she just wanted to introduce herself to South Florida's political scene. Magar said she didn't know Hires planned to file, and Hires said the two don't know each other well.

Hires, a conservative and supporter of former presidential candidate Rick Santorum, said she's fine with how her candidacy affects the race, since Democrats had their chance to produce a candidate and didn't. She said Republicans should only get to choose from their candidates in primaries, and vice versa.

"I understand what happens, and I think that's OK," Hires said. "I think it has a positive effect."

After a write-in qualifies and closes the primary, the August winner ends up on the open November ballot. Aside from that winner, voters' only other general election option is a blank line where they can write in names, which typically yields just a handful of votes.

Write-in candidates don't pay a fee or collect signatures to qualify. The state received Hires' statement of candidacy about an hour before the noon June 8 deadline.
Hires’ candidacy cuts off 54 percent of District 82’s registered voters in August — 29 percent Democratic, 25 independent. The newly redrawn seat features 127,339 voting-age residents, according to Florida Senate numbers.

A registered nurse from the Turtle Creek neighborhood, Hires gave $250 to the Magar campaign in February, state Division of Elections records show. Magar, the Martin County Republican Executive Committee’s state committeewoman, said she met Hires about six months ago at a local GOP committee meeting. Hires also attended one of her fundraisers, Magar said, but she said she only found out Friday that Hires filed.

Hires said just because she donated to the campaign, that doesn't make her part of it.

Magar didn't disagree with closing off the primary, however.

"I do believe the Republicans should vote for Republicans and Democrats vote for Democrats in primaries," she said. "Both parties should try to get candidates to run in races."

The rest of the field had varied opinions on shutting Democrats and independents out of the August election.

Tequesta Councilman Calvin Turnquest, also in the running for District 82, said it was wrong to cut out half the electorate.

"I think it's a shame to silence the voices of a few thousand people who wanted to vote," Turnquest said. "I think you're doing a great injustice."

Candidate Jon Pasqualone, a Martin County firefighter, said it's an unfortunate because the entire district — not just Republicans — will be represented by whomever wins the race.

"I'm campaigning on a platform for all of the people, and all of the people won't have a vote on who will get in," Pasqualone said.

Another candidate, Jupiter Republican and former House Rep. Carl Domino, said the move doesn't concern him, since he has won elections with just Republicans, and he's won open races. But he hinted he thought Magar wanted the write-in to file.

"Obviously, one of five people, and I think I know who it is, only wanted Republicans to vote," Domino said.

In GOP-heavy Martin County, write-ins last week also shut the sheriff's race and one county commission seat down to just Republican voters.

Jonathan Milton, a Stuart engineer in the mix for District 82, said closing the August election somewhat takes away from the democratic process.
"I don't know what the overall impact this will have in the election," Milton said. "It's unfortunate there are a number of voters who aren't registered Republicans who want to choose who their next representative is. These are the rules we live by, and it is what it is."

Martin Democratic Executive Committee Chair Dave Dew said the election won't reflect the full district's preference.

Across Florida, write-ins closed off Republican-only races for 10 other House and one Senate seat. But all-Democrat primaries were also closed off to GOP and independent voters in one Senate and four House races.

"It won't be the people's choice," Dew said of the District 82 race. "It will be the choice of staunch Republicans and right-wing party people."

Florida Atlantic University assistant political science professor Kevin Wagner said using write-ins to close off elections has become so expected that supporters often say it's just smart politics.

"The fact that (Hires) donated money suggests she probably doesn't support herself as a candidate," Wagner said. "But there's nothing illegal about it."