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U.S. Senate candidate, and heir to 'he-coon?'

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The first member of the Chiles family to win a statewide elective office since the legendary Gov. Lawton Chiles just might do so in North Carolina.

Democrat Kay Hagan, the late Lawton Chiles' niece, is locked in one of the hottest U.S. Senate races in the country.

For most of the year, political experts thought Hagan had little chance to unseat Republican Elizabeth Dole, whose husband is former Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole.

But the hard-charging Hagan has run such a strong campaign national experts now believe she is the favorite against Dole.

"We all knew she could win," said Manatee County businessman Ed Chiles, one of Lawton's four children and Hagan's cousin.

Just last week analysts at the Rothenberg Political Report in Washington, D.C., changed their outlook on the race as a toss-up to leaning in Hagan's favor.

Ed Chiles said the change is no surprise to him. Watching her grow up in Lakeland, Chiles said it was clear from an early age Hagan that was indefatigable.

"Her energy level is incredible," said Chiles, who expects to be in North Carolina on election night to support his cousin.

The turnaround is somewhat reminiscent of Lawton Chiles, who was thought to be trailing Republican Jeb Bush in the final weeks of their 1994 gubernatorial campaign. When a reporter at a debate asked Chiles about his struggling campaign he famously responded "the old he-coon walks just before the light of day," a reference to Old Florida lore about the oldest and wisest raccoons waiting until the last minute to make their move.

Chiles went on to win re-election. He died four years later during his last month in office.

Buchanan aims high

U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan's political ambitions may not end in Congress.

Buchanan, R-Longboat Key, still faces a re-election battle against Democrat Christine Jennings and two independents. But in a recent interview Buchanan acknowledged he sees Congress as a first step into politics.

"I don't know where my public service will take me," he said. "This is my starting point. I don't know where it evolves to."

Fewer female candidates

For sure 2008 has been historic in that Sen. Hillary Clinton ran for president and Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin is a vice presidential candidate.

"But at other levels, the numbers of women candidates are disappointing," said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University. "Renewed efforts are needed across the country to recruit and encourage women to run at every level."

In U.S. Senate contests, only seven women are major party candidates, compared with 12 in 2006. The number of women running as major party candidates for House races also dropped from 136 in 2006 to 133 this year. And nationwide, the number of women running in state Legislature races has dropped from 2,429 two years ago to 2,301 this year.

A different story is playing out in Sarasota County. Not only does the race for Congress have a major party candidate who is a woman for the fourth consecutive time, but so do three of the six state Legislature seats on the ballot.

And in the 11 countywide races, there will be 11 major party candidates who are women.

State Senate candidate Nancy Detert, a former state legislator and a Republican, said it was quite a surprise to go from Sarasota, where female candidates are commonplace, to Tallahassee, where she often found herself the only woman in the room.

"It's really a big difference," Detert said.

Though women make up more than half of Florida's population, just 23 percent of Florida's state legislators are women. Twenty percent of the state's members of Congress are women.

POLITICAL CALENDAR

Today: State Senate candidates Nancy Detert, a Republican, and Morgan Bentley, a Democrat, will be among the candidates speaking at a two-hour forum sponsored by the Sarasota County Arts Council at 4 p.m. State House candidates in District 69 and District 70 will also participate. The free event is at the Center for Arts and Humanity, 1226 N. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota. For more information, call 365-5118.

The North Port Democratic Club holds a rally and its monthly meeting at 7 p.m. at the Mullen Center, 4956 City Center Blvd., North Port.

U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan speaks to the Siesta Key/Greater Sarasota Republican Club at 6:30 p.m. at Mattison's 41, 7275 S. Tamiami Trail; Sarasota. \$24. For reservations, call 926-0632.

Tuesday: Congressional candidate Christine Jennings and state Senate candidate Morgan Bentley, both Democrats, speak to the Longboat Key Democratic Club at 11:30 a.m. at the Longboat Key Club Harbourside Dining Room, Longboat Key. Cost is \$23 per person. To attend, call 838-4899.

Saturday: The Venice Democratic Club meets at 12:30 p.m. at the United Church of Christ, Naar Hall, 620 Shamrock Blvd., Venice.

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