

The election no one expects

Mark Ballard

The best debut video in what otherwise is a boring election season has to be Public Service Commission candidate Craig Greene talking about checking if a cow is pregnant.

"There's only one way to check," he says.

Actually, there's more than one way, but his knowing chuckle indicates he means the most direct: rectal palpation.

It's a great spot for a first time candidate. It touches all the sacred elements of political ads: a character-building experience with Dad, praying, family first, and jobs. "I want to create jobs and get Louisiana back to work."

Laudable, except that's not what PSC commissioners do. Sticking square political bromides into a round job description isn't unusual for PSC races. The other two candidates - interim PSC Commissioner Damon Baldone and former state representative Lenar Whitney, both of Houma - started with bickering over who can be a Republican and have since pivoted to global warming. "The PSC is the most important job you've never heard of. These commissioners make decisions that impact Louisiana, you, directly every day," New Orleans consumer advocate Logan Atkinson Burke said of the five elected officials. The PSC regulates telecommunications, intrastate trucking, even cabbies, as well as privately owned utilities that operate as monopolies.

At the nexus of high finance and complex engineering, the PSC is largely ignored by reporters as not nearly click-worthy as, say, a college administrator having an extramarital affair or a football coach phoning an escort service.

But they do decide how much will be on the largest monthly bill, for most consumers, after the mortgage.

That's why the Alliance for Affordable Energy, the ratepayer advocacy group for which Burke is executive director, is organizing a forum for the Oct. 14 election. "We want to educate people, but we also want to find out how much these candidates know about the job they're seeking," Burke said.

Few voters are expected to turn out in the 13 parishes of the

predominantly Republican PSC District 2, which covers south Baton Rouge, Morgan City, Lafayette and Houma-Thibodaux areas. The all-GOP race is to fill the remaining months of Scott Angelle's term after he joined the Trump administration.

A Democrat when appointed the interim commissioner by Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards in June, Baldone signed up to run as a Republican a couple of weeks ago, provoking ire among the keepers of partisan orthodoxy.

"He's an ambulance-chasing trial lawyer," one conservative blogger wrote, employing the ultimate conservative insult in describing Baldone.

He does represent injured people against insurance companies. But Baldone reported making \$432,968 representing gambling interests on his July 17 financial disclosure. A multi-millionaire, he also owns a variety of small businesses and rental properties.

Greene supported Edwards over David Vitter in the 2015 gubernatorial election.

A successful Baton Rouge surgeon who did not agree to an interview, Greene's father is a former Republican state senator. Greene is backed by the Bayou Lafourche billionaire boatmen who fund much of the state's GOP efforts.

Whitney is the Republican Party National Committeewoman from Louisiana. She lists as her "principal campaign committee" the Wichita headquarters of the billionaire Koch brothers who fund a number of conservative causes nationally.

Whitney is perhaps best remembered for a four-minute video when running for Congress in 2014. She called human-caused climate change "the greatest deception in the history of mankind," which could be disproven by a child with a thermometer. British comedian Russell Brand's comedic riff on Whitney's video was seen worldwide.

Congressmen have only an ethereal impact on global warming. But in running for the PSC, Whitney is seeking a seat on a panel whose decisions affect climate change daily.

Louisiana has a fleet of 40- to 50-year-old electricity generating plants that need replacement.

The PSC already has approved the construction of new plants in St. Charles Parish and Lake Charles costing \$1.7 billion and largely paid

for by customers. Commissioners are being asked to allow Entergy to purchase a Washington Parish plant by 2021. Other similar projects are on the drawing boards, and not just for Entergy.

These new plants will ultimately better guarantee reliable power with fewer pollutants at lower costs for customers. But the plants will become assets for a utility's owners that are paid for by its customers. Regulators must decide if Louisiana is better served building plants for private companies or buying power on the open market.

"Their job is to balance a broader panorama of factors and make decisions in the public interest," Burke said, adding, "Their decisions are really important, particularly over the next six years, they will impact the state for decades to come."

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