

# Primary is only contest in matchup between Cheatham, Riggs for Idaho's District 3

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First-term state representative and area newcomer Don Cheatham says he was motivated to become an Idaho legislator to “give something back to my community” after a career in law enforcement in Southern California and working for Homeland Security in Washington, D.C.

That’s also why Cheatham, 70, is seeking a second term in the Idaho House; he and his wife moved to North Idaho in 2012.

Peter Riggs, 36, a North Idaho native, is running against him.

“I think being from here, having grown up here, being educated here, building a business here – it’s given me a precious frame of reference,” he said. “I’ve got a deep-rooted passion for continuing to make sure that this area stays on the right track and really continues to be the type of place that we’ve fought for many years to make it.”

Riggs is particularly concerned about “obstructionism and kind of a ‘just say no’ attitude as of late from a lot of our legislators.” He said, “It’s easier to say ‘no’ than to do the right thing well. ... I think it’s time for our community and our city to expect more from its legislators.”

Cheatham and Riggs are facing off in the Republican primary in District 3, which is located in western Kootenai County and includes Post Falls. It’s the only contested race in the district – both Sen. Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d’Alene, and Rep. Ron Mendive, R-Coeur d’Alene, are unopposed – and there are no Democrats running, so the winner of the Cheatham-Riggs matchup will win by default in the November general election.

Cheatham served in the Air Force.

“I enjoyed that so much, I was so proud to serve my nation, I came back and wanted to do something locally. So I went on the police department, and did that 25 years,” he said.

That was the Los Angeles Police Department, where he retired as a detective. He then worked in security for Bank of America for eight years, and as a regional director for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security for eight years, before retiring again.

“I had the opportunity to visit a lot of states,” he said. “I picked the best one, Idaho. ... Beautiful territory, charitable people, conservative state, religious people.”

In his first term, Cheatham sponsored a bill to allow a concealed weapons permit to be used as acceptable photo identification when voting; it passed the House but didn't get a hearing in the Senate. He raised fears of "federal overreach" in his first year when a young girl proposed naming the Idaho giant salamander the state amphibian; he later dropped his opposition to the new state symbol and the youngster's bill passed.

The passage of the permitless concealed carry bill for firearms outside city limits was "a big accomplishment" of this year's legislative session, Cheatham said. He added that he tried to work for "opportunities for business growth, protecting people, assisting veterans and promoting fiscal responsibility."

Cheatham said he feels sorry for people who fall into Idaho's health coverage gap – making too little to qualify for subsidized health insurance through the state insurance exchange, but too much to be covered by Medicaid – but couldn't support legislation aimed at closing the gap.

"The three biggest problems were cost, cost and cost," he said. "I'm just trying to be fiscally responsible."

He also voted against the transportation funding package that passed his first year, which raised Idaho's gas tax for the first time since 1996 and boosted registration fees to fund road repairs.

"I think the best way of reducing spending is to cut taxes," he said. "I just thought we could have done it a better way."

Riggs, the son of physician and former Idaho Lt. Gov. Jack Riggs, is the president of Pita Pit USA, a chain restaurant founded in Canada with nearly 600 locations worldwide. He bought a Pita Pit franchise in 2003 and was part of a group that took over the chain's operations in the United States in 2005. The headquarters for Pita Pit's 240 American locations is in Coeur d'Alene.

"My background is in small business. And so I think making sure that the business community in Idaho is thriving and making sure that there are plenty of good-paying jobs – the type of jobs that our kids want when they graduate from school" is top priority. Having local kids go on to college and graduate and then say, 'I've got to leave town because there just aren't the careers that I'm looking for in this area,' is an absolute tragedy," he said.

Riggs said if elected, he'll focus on education and economic development.

"You couldn't be more of a product of the educational system in Idaho than I am," he said, having attended the public schools "from kindergarten through two degrees at the University of Idaho," where he earned both his bachelor's degree and a Master of Business Administration.

He said he's also a gun rights and property rights supporter who wants to fight against federal overreach and keep Idaho as independent and self-sufficient as possible. He and his wife, Tyree, have two sons, ages 1 and 4.

Riggs praised Cheatham for choosing Idaho to live after he retired, but said despite his decades of experience in government positions, he's not right for the Idaho Legislature.

"I just don't think that he's got the frame of reference or basically the background to say that he can make the best decisions for our community," Riggs said.

Riggs noted that Cheatham didn't respond to a candidate survey from the Coeur d'Alene Press, one of just a handful of lawmakers to pass on that, and has appeared at few public forums.

"The public, when they elect somebody, they deserve to have their questions answered, even if they're tough ones," Riggs said.

Cheatham said he's not avoiding the tough issues.

"I thought I'd already put out my feelings and where I stood on issues," he said. "I really wanted to talk to people firsthand."

He said he also was sidelined by recent hand surgery for three weeks, limiting his campaign activities, but said now, "I'm down to a Band-Aid."

Cheatham said he commissioned polling that showed him his legislative district includes lots of seniors and that his constituents are worried about security, Second Amendment rights and religious freedom.