

Wolfinger fends off challenge for Kootenai County sheriff

Scott Maben/SR

Kootenai County Sheriff Ben Wolfinger survived a challenge from the hard right of the Republican party in Tuesday's Idaho primary, while Kootenai County Commissioner David Stewart lost his bid for a second term.

Wolfinger prevailed with 61 percent of the vote to defeat Rathdrum attorney John Green, who is part of the "constitutional sheriffs" movement that pushes back against federal government overreach.

"I'm feeling pretty good right now," the sheriff said Tuesday night. "The numbers are looking good. It started out strong and stayed strong. We ran a good, clean campaign on both sides."

In the general election, Wolfinger will face another "constitutional sheriff" activist. Tina Kunishige, a machine gun manufacturer and firearms dealer, ran unopposed as a Democrat in the primary to ensure she could compete in November. The county's Democratic Central Committee is not supporting Kunishige and urged Democrats not to vote for her.

"I'm looking forward to the race in November," Wolfinger said. "We've still got work to do, and I'm looking forward to going back to work tomorrow and continuing to move the agency forward."

Stewart, who has served two years on the Board of Commissioners, lost to Chris Fillios, a Coeur d'Alene Realtor and residential appraiser who took 56 percent of the vote.

In a four-way race for an open seat on the Board of Commissioners, Spirit Lake resident Bob Bingham prevailed with a late vote surge that gave him 29 percent - just 69 votes ahead of Hayden businesswoman Leslie Duncan, who was leading in results most of the night. Bingham is founder of the North West Property Owners Alliance, a conservative property and privacy rights group.

Green, who spent about 10 years as a Texas peace officer, belongs to the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, a group that believes federal agencies exceed their constitutional authority on issues concerning taxes, land management and gun rights. Making his second bid for sheriff, he criticized Wolfinger's ideological view on the office and said the county sheriff has an obligation to defy laws that violate the state or federal constitutions.

Wolfinger, a 33-year veteran of the department, easily won the 2012 general election and took the reins from retiring Sheriff Rocky Watson. He ran on his experience and knowledge of the

office, and said he had worked to improve employee morale, get a wage raise for patrol deputies, fill vacancies, reduce turnover and plan for a jail expansion without seeking a tax measure to fund it.

Kunishige, his general election opponent, says she wants to “demilitarize” the sheriff’s office. In a recent Facebook post she wrote, “Our Sheriff’s deputies are walking around looking like they are ready for battle with our communities as battlegrounds. We are not the enemy here.”

She also said the FBI had no jurisdiction to assist in the March manhunt for Kyle Odom, the accused shooter of Coeur d’Alene pastor Tim Remington.

Kunishige says she “will stand in the face of tyranny!” and is “the only candidate who truly knows the Constitution from the founding father’s original intent.” She drives around in a late-model, mustard yellow Ford Mustang painted with the words “Elect Tina Kunishige Sheriff Kootenai County” on the doors.

In the District 2 commissioner’s race, Stewart campaigned on themes – private property rights, primarily – that helped get him elected to his first term two years ago. He has worked to ease land-use rules in the county and promised to keep streamlining the land-use code and comprehensive plan.

“The more regulations we have, the more freedoms we lose,” he told voters.

Stewart, who owns automotive lube shops in Spokane, also touted his opposition to raising taxes.

Fillios, who sits on the East Side Highway District board, said he favors updating and simplifying county land-use regulations, but unlike Stewart he opposes eliminating rules such as the 25-foot lakeside buffer intended to limit erosion. Fillios also spoke during the campaign of a need for the county to better promote economic growth, including ways to attract professionals and highly skilled workers to the area.

In the District 3 race, Bingham won with 29 percent of the vote. Duncan, who sits on the Kootenai County Aquifer Protection District board, placed second with 28.5 percent, followed by 23 percent for Hayden lawyer Duane Rasmussen, and 19 percent for Fred Meckel, a family mental health therapist and member of the Rathdrum City Council.