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Maverick may lob fat pitch to 2010 opponents

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Steve Mulroy is a guy who doesn't mind living on the edge, politically speaking.

Last month, Mulroy persuaded his colleagues on the Shelby County Commission to go on record in favor of a change in state law that would make it much easier for elected officials to meet in private.

Actually, he didn't have to do a whole lot of persuading; the resolution passed by an 11-0 vote.

Because the political party that controls the seat from the oddly shaped District 5 effectively controls the County Commission, Steve Mulroy will almost certainly be a marked man in the 2010 election.

It was, however, a potentially controversial stand on an issue the commissioners could have easily avoided, since it will be up to the General Assembly to decide whether the state's open meetings law needs to be amended.

It's not the first time since he was elected to the commission in August 2006 that Mulroy has figured prominently in debates about touchy issues.

Mulroy, a Democrat, has been outspoken about the need to create a position for a second Juvenile Court judge -- a position many Republicans view as an attempt to undercut the authority of current Judge Curtis Person.

Mulroy chaired a panel that pushed for a "living wage" ordinance, which the commission passed on a vote that split along party lines.

Mulroy was the swing vote when commissioners decided to lift a restriction on the dollar value of gifts they could receive from people who do business with county government, another measure approved with a 7-6 partisan split.

And, outside of his duties as a commissioner, Mulroy was one of the attorneys who represented Ophelia Ford when her first attempt to win a state Senate seat deteriorated into a bitter legal and partisan political battle.

For Mulroy's 12 colleagues, voting along party lines theoretically carries fewer risks. They're all in districts with populations that are heavily skewed toward Democratic or Republican voters.

Mulroy's District 5 is a bit different, though. Geographically, it's an odd-shaped sliver of land that covers parts of East Memphis and southeast Memphis.

At the time the boundaries were drawn in 2001, it was designed to be a "swing" district that either a Republican or a Democratic candidate could win. Since the political party that controls that seat effectively controls the commission, Mulroy will almost certainly be a marked man in the 2010 election.

Bill Giannini, chairman of the Shelby County Republican Party, said it wouldn't be surprising if future opponents try to probe Mulroy's voting record for potential weaknesses.

"I think Steve has taken some unusual positions on some things, maybe some unpredictable positions to people who supported him," Giannini said.

That said, the issues that have landed Mulroy in the news won't necessarily be the same ones that determine the outcome of the next election.

For example, Republican activist John Ryder doesn't think average citizens care as much about the commission's stand on the open meetings law as some of us in the media do.

"It will not move one-tenth of 1 percent of the electorate," Ryder said.

Ryder said voters typically respond to concerns that hit closer to home -- crime, taxes, schools, neighborhood conditions -- than the skirmishes that preoccupy political insiders.

Also, standing with his fellow Democrats may not be as politically dicey as it might seem.

Although Mulroy's predecessor was Republican Bruce Thompson, who chose not to seek re-election, the district has been steadily tilting toward Democrats since then.

According to the Shelby County Election Commission's records, a whopping 59.2 percent of the district's voters went Democratic in the May 2006 county primary elections, while 40.8 percent went Republican.

Then, of course, there was Mulroy's win over Republican Jane Pierotti in the general election that year.

Layne Provine, a Republican political consultant, thinks Mulroy's toughest opposition could actually come from someone within his own party -- if, for instance, a black Democrat wanted to try to take advantage of the district's shifting racial demographics.

"Is it (the seat) in play in three years? I think it definitely is," Provine said. "... (But) I don't think Mulroy's vulnerability is from the Republicans. I think his vulnerability comes in a primary."

For his part, Mulroy said he's not making political calculations before he takes stands on the issues. He points out that he hasn't been afraid to side with Republicans when his principles suggest he should, as with a recent ordinance regulating sexually oriented businesses.

"If I've been at the center of the storm, it's because I see my role as trying to forge consensus on contentious issues," he said.

And whether he chooses it or not, the center of the storm is where he's likely to stay.

Politics Today aims to provide depth and perspective on political happenings in Memphis and the Mid-South. It runs on the Comment page every Monday.

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