

A 2010 Race to Watch

To the editor, Grand Rapids Herald Review:

Who is our State Auditor and who cares? Rebecca Otto (DFL) and almost no one. The race for this office (that only party hacks and candidates' spouses follow), could be interesting this year.

One would think that the last thing voters would want is the politicization of government auditing, yet the Minnesota Constitution calls for the State Auditor to run for election. Worse yet, no competency requirements are called for in the Constitution. Both parties have used the office as a springboard to higher aspirations. One current gubernatorial candidate from each party came by way of the Office of State Auditor.

Other states have CPA State Auditors, but from the territorial days to present, Minnesota has never had a State Auditor who is a CPA. This may change; and *that* would be interesting. A real live CPA is running for the job.

Jeff Wiita, CPA, of Minnetonka is a 26-year veteran of the Office of State Auditor. He has seen the politicians come and go with the political winds and the wind-damage left behind.

Last year, the State Auditor produced county audits as late as 18 months after the close of the fiscal year. The federal money that cities and counties receive requires timely audits.

The untimely auditing by the Office of State Auditor (OSA) is particularly vexing to the 19 counties (including Itasca) that just received a letter from the Department of Human Services (DHS). This letter requests the 2008 final audit report from these counties and threatens sanctions (loss of funding) for non-compliance (DHS is the agency responsible for accountability of federal funds to counties).

Wiita has a plan to privatize the Audit Practice Division of the OSA, shrink the bureaucracy by about four-fifths, save cities and counties enormous money and oversee timely audits of the taxpayers' money.

Mr. Wiita sees the proper role of the State Auditor as setting audit standards and overseeing the private CPA firms that will take over the audits now done by the OSA. Based upon a bid from a private CPA firm, Mahnomem County would save about \$24 for a family of four by privatizing OSA audits. This example is believed to be typical of the savings for privatized rural county audits.

With a plan for smaller, more efficient government and a privatization plan that saves taxpayer dollars, Wiita is hoping to win the GOP endorsement at their state convention in April. Others are also seeking the endorsement and they are politicians. This presents a dilemma for the GOP; will it wield the political battleaxe or go for the consummate apolitical professional with no civic aspirations beyond fixing the Office of the State Auditor?

Next November you will pull the lever for a Governor and a Lieutenant Governor. Down the list a bit will be those names you've never seen before. If you are lucky, you just may see that name of which you have now heard, Jeff Wiita CPA.

Terry Stone
International Falls
(218) 283-9290