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Benzie sheriff candidates mum on record

Would-be sheriff, undersheriff won't reveal reprimand

By ART BUKOWSKI
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BEULAH -- Joe O'Connor wants to be Benzie County's next undersheriff, but he refuses to discuss his disciplinary record in the Michigan State Police.

Mum's also the word for Benzie sheriff candidate Brant Downing, who recently named O'Connor, 48, a sergeant with the state police Emergency Management & Homeland Security Division in Lansing, to serve as his would-be second-in-command in Benzie.

Downing this week acknowledged O'Connor was "reprimanded" for using a state police computer for non-government uses, but he wouldn't explain.

"It's in the history books. He served his reprimand," Downing said. "Nothing criminal has taken place."

Downing, though, said he doesn't exactly know what O'Connor did to get in trouble. O'Connor didn't provide him with specifics and Downing said he didn't push for details, including the type of computer violation, when it occurred, or the severity and length of discipline.

The Record-Eagle interviewed O'Connor this month, and he denied having any criminal history or disciplinary problems. When a reporter re-contacted O'Connor about the computer-related discipline, he said Downing told him to keep quiet.

"He has directed me to no longer talk to the media," O'Connor said.

Downing contends "rumors" about O'Connor have swirled in the county in the lead-up to the Nov. 4 election, when he'll face current Benzie undersheriff Rory Heckman to succeed retiring Sheriff Bob Blank.

Downing, 25, has a criminal justice degree, but no professional law enforcement experience. He works for Frankfort's Department of Public Works and said he met O'Connor during an internship with the state's Homeland Security Division.

Downing said O'Connor, a 20-year state police veteran who began work in Saginaw County's Bridgeport post, is well-qualified and would make a sound undersheriff.

"I'm confident in the fact that Joe O'Connor's decision-making as undersheriff (will be) better than what was offered in Benzie County before."

O'Connor, a Detroit native, said he received a criminal justice degree from Eastern Michigan University in 1985 and a law degree from the University of Detroit in 1994.

Heckman contends the lack of information about the computer incident raises concerns.

"The first question that comes to the mind of anybody is, 'What are they hiding?'" said Heckman, Benzie's undersheriff since March 2007 and a law enforcement veteran of 30-plus years with police departments in Kalamazoo and Mt. Pleasant.

State police spokeswoman Shanon Akans refused to provide details about O'Connor's discipline. State police Director Col. Peter Munoz did not return a telephone call seeking comment.



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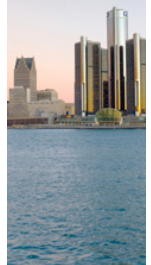
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