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Teacher or mayor? Law says candidate must choose

Thursday, February 26, 2009

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Teresa Zemaitis is waging two campaigns - to become mayor of Kenneth City and to keep her job as a teacher.

KENNETH CITY (Bay News 9) -- A Pinellas County teacher wants to be the mayor of Kenneth City, but the political campaign is turning into a fight to stay in the classroom.

Teresa Zemaitis teaches reading at Dixie Hollins High School, a job she said she can't imagine not coming to each day.

"It's fun," she said. "I love coming to work every day."

But these days, when the school day ends, her work continues. She's campaigning to be the next mayor of Kenneth City.

"I'm out putting flyers, signs out," Zemaitis said. "Multi-tasking is something I'm pretty used to and good at."

But it turns out that Zemaitis is facing some unusual opposition - not only from the incumbent mayor, Muriel Whitman, but from the town of Kenneth City itself.

The town's charter has a section that could either keep her out of the classroom or out of the mayor's office. According to Section 401.d, "The mayor shall hold no other employment during the term."

Some argue this means the mayor can't teach at a public school.

Kenneth City attorney Tom Scarritt Jr. said his city isn't the first to bar a mayor from holding other public employment.

"The purpose has been found to be that they don't want, in essence, one person hogging all the jobs in small towns, all the public jobs in small towns," he said. "They don't want the mayor to be distracted from his or her duties."

Still, Zemaitis refuses to give up the campaign or her job.

"I can't live on a salary, that \$6,000 that the mayor pays," she said. "I think it's a discriminatory clause we have in our charter."

She's joined forces with the American Civil Liberties Union to plead her case. But even if she does win the mayor's race on March 10, her fight to lead both the city and her classroom is just beginning. Scarritt is ready to file an injunction to keep her from being sworn in until the issue is resolved by a judge.

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