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Local&State

Challenger's tone turns more critical as election nears

Montelongo says
Spears has dropped
the ball on drainage

By MIKE RAMSEY
of the Journal Star

PEORIA — It started off harmlessly enough, with Jim Montelongo mulling a run in

ELECTION 2001

Peoria City Council 4th District

the 4th District as a way to bring a new perspective to the City Council.

"I want to give back to

■ Peoria Township supervisor's race. B3

community," he told the Journal Star in December, when asked his opinion of incumbent councilman Bill Spears. "I think I could bring some more business sense and thinking to how decisions are made."

Things have changed. Montelongo, 33-year-old owner of a high-tech Peoria business, Advanced CAD-CAM Service Corp., now has critical things to say about his opponent in Tuesday's election. The computer-design whiz says Spears isn't communicating with his constituents and has dropped the ball on the district's big issue, drainage problems.

What changed his tenor? Montelongo says he has received an earful from residents while campaigning door to door.

Communication "is a major problem, people saying, 'We wish we knew what the hell was going on,'" Montelongo said. "As I'm talking to people

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door to door, that is very important. You need to be in a position where you can listen to them and where you can communicate (with) them."

Meanwhile, Spears, business manager for Plumbers Local 63, is fighting back with criticisms of his own, such as Montelongo's failure to vote in the last several elections. And Spears, elected in 1997, takes credit for at least making drainage and erosion control a higher priority in the city budget.

"The awareness is now out there," he said during a tour of flood-prone areas, including Rolling Acres subdivision. "Each year, we're putting more and more funding into taking care of storm drains."

The issue has vexed city officials since at least the 1970s, as the 4th District filled in with new residential and commercial development under more lenient drainage standards. Some neighborhoods, built prior to their annexation into Peoria, never had the proper infrastructure installed.

Peoria's citywide strategy is to undertake a number of small drainage projects each year; about \$600,000 is budgeted annually for programs, including those that share costs with private property owners. Public Works Director Steve Van Winkle acknowledges, however, that the problem is huge and would cost tens of millions of dollars to correct.

"This year, it's a very big priority, but the problem is, there is no easy answer here," Van Winkle said. "Even though we're spending this kind of money, are we really making any headway? The short-term answer is yes. Are we doing what we would logically be doing if we started with a blank sheet of paper? No."

Montelongo says he has discovered outside money and expertise are available for drainage, but Spears hasn't inquired about them. Spears insists he has contacted various officials but that grants don't magically appear. The city is obligated to go through the time-consuming process of drafting large-scale, potentially expensive plans, he said.

Responding to the criticism he doesn't communicate with residents, Spears says he meets occasionally with neighborhood groups but prefers to wait for invitations. He doubts his opponent's idea of holding regular meetings would work because residents tend to come out only when there's a burning issue to discuss.

"I hate to tell him, but I've had neighborhood meetings where only five to six people show up," Spears said.

The incumbent also draws fire for what some civic leaders consider to be an anti-business attitude; Spears last year helped cut Riverfront Development as a separate department, and in 1999 he voted against tax subsidies for a proposed Northwest Peoria mall. The Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce snubbed Spears in its list of "recommended" candidates, opting instead for Montelongo, a board member.

"It's everyone's concern from the business community

Jim Montelongo

Peoria City Council 4th District



Age: 33

Address: 3511 W. Saymore Lane

Occupation: CEO, president of Advanced CAD/CAM Services.

Family: Wife,

three sons.

Education: Machesney Park Harlem High School; Bradley University.

Civic, public or political experience: member, Peoria Area Chamber of Commerce.

On the Issues

Retail viability: "Retail viability in the 4th District depends on several items to be competitive with new and existing retail: accessibility to the retail (no potholes, good snow removal, smooth flow of traffic); safety (people want to know that the shopping center they are going to is safe in and around); image (keep it very clean, keep it looking progressive and enforce code pro-actively). We must work with our businesses prior to I-74 reconstruction and surrounding mall area to make sure there will be accessibility."

Basic city services: "The people in the 4th District would like to see road improvements, faster snow removal, water drainage and more sidewalks. The city must work to be more customer service-oriented and proactive to serve our residents."

Sears Block: "I believe the Sears block should be modeled after or similar to Chicago's Navy Pier. I believe we should have a (city-owned) museum for children and adults, a museum that recognizes history and key accomplishments by people from all parts of the City of Peoria, an IMAX theater, specialty retail and eateries."

Water company buyout: "Historically, governments do not run businesses efficiently. I would have many business questions that would need to be answered. I would like to keep an open mind to see what happens and see what our options are. Perhaps a referendum after we have been fully informed."

Economic development: "Planning, Planning, Planning. A five-year, 10-year and a 20-year plan is necessary. We must help current business grow and expand. We must identify what business we want in our community and go after them to relocate or open an office here."

that there's definitely issues with our City Council, perhaps that they're not giving us the right leadership that we need to help our businesses grow," Montelongo said.

Spears counters that he has gone to bat for retailers in his district and that his campaign has enjoyed financial support from commercial developers such as David Joseph, Russ Waldschmidt and Les Cohen.

"It's easy" to pick on the incumbent, Spears says. "I'm not

Bill Spears

Peoria City Council 4th District



Age: 44

Address: 2225 W. Overhill Road

Occupation: Business manager, Plumbers Local 63.

Family: Wife, three sons.

Education: Spalding High School; completed plumber apprenticeship program.

Civic, public or political experience: Fourth District councilman since 1997; at-large representative, 1991-1995; past board president, Heart of Illinois United Way; steering committee, Illinois High School Association basketball tournament.

On the Issues

Retail viability in the 4th: Opposed public subsidies for a proposed Northwest Peoria mall; has worked with developers to "fill in" unused retail space in the district, which includes Westlake Shopping Center, Northwoods Mall and Sheridan Village. "I'll continue to work toward keeping the 4th District the retail hub of the city."

Basic city services: "It's always a top priority to try to obtain the best services at the lowest cost."

Sears Block: Among the council members who slowed the planning process for the riverfront property: "I think we're doing the right thing. Take it slowly, make sure what we are going to do is something that is very viable for the rest of the city. What it is, I don't know yet."

Water company buyout: Opposed studying a potential buyout of Illinois-American Water Co. and a related \$1 million loan to pay for it; now supports honoring that contract: "If they came back, and the water company's (price) was ridiculously low, and we could buy it for that price, I say, yes, I don't see why we shouldn't own it. At that point, I think it's giving a service back to the citizens."

Economic development: Supported a 2001 city budget that eliminated Riverfront Development as a separate office; hopes the city will "keep working on good economic development and develop good-paying jobs."

trying to belittle (Montelongo). I guess it's just one of those things. When you're an incumbent, you need to expect it. I don't know how he stands on the issues because he's never had to take a vote."

Speaking of voting, Spears says it's odd that Montelongo is running for public office after rarely voting in prior elections. After reviewing polling records, he found that Montelongo voted for the first time only last year.

"That's a non-issue, really," Montelongo responds. "When I was going to Bradley, did I vote? No. Afterward, I got caught up in my business, just had my nose to the grindstone trying to make this business successful. Did I care about anything else? Probably not."