

Entering home stretch, race for St. Tammany Parish president could be a nail-biter

President Mike Cooper has the incumbent's advantage -- but his challenger, Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer, has scooped up important endorsements.

By ALEX LUBBEN | Staff writer
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St. Tammany Parish President Mike Cooper, left, and Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer, right, will meet in the St. Tammany Parish President's race Oct. 14, 2023.

St. Tammany Parish President Mike Cooper has had a long first term.

Since he took office in 2020, he's led the parish through a hurricane and a pandemic. He's dealt with a budget crisis that has strained the parish's finances. Property developers have practically besieged the north shore, gunning to put up new housing that, many residents argue, the parish doesn't have the roads and drainage to support. All of this has played out while Cooper's relationship with the 14-member Parish Council has frayed to the point of being essentially non-existent.

Now, Cooper has a challenger in the Oct. 14 election: Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer, an established political name who's pledged to mend relationships across parish government and has collected several of St. Tammany's most coveted political endorsements.

"You've got to look at the council and the parish president as a team," Cromer said. "We've got 1,124 square miles of space in St. Tammany Parish. It's huge." The parish president, Cromer emphasized, can't be everywhere all the time. Without communication, the government can't function as it should.

"At best, we're stagnant," he said. "At worst, we're dysfunctional."

The parish's Republican Executive Committee has endorsed Cromer. The local Chamber of Commerce Political Action Committee is supporting Cromer, too, as is the Alliance for Good Government and Greater New Orleans Area Republican PAC.

But Cooper is anything but out of the race. "I haven't received those endorsements in the past," Cooper, who is also a Republican, said. And he's still won races. He also boasted that he doesn't have the support of developers in the parish, whom he says have lined up behind his opponent.



Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer and Parish President Mike Cooper answer questions from the Chamber of Commerce. St. Tammany Chamber held a Parish President Candidate Forum for the upcoming election between current President Mike Cooper and Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer at The Greystone in Mandeville on Wednesday, Aug. 9, 2023.

PHOTO BY GRANT THERKILDSEN

The most recent campaign finance reports show Cooper has nearly twice as much cash on hand — nearly \$302,000 — as his challenger, although Cromer spent substantially more than Cooper in the early part of the election season. Cooper plans on bombard the airwaves in the final few weeks.

And Cooper knows how to win elections. He served two terms as mayor of Covington before defeating incumbent Parish President Pat Brister in 2019. In spite of the challenges, Cooper said he's managed to tackle big projects. "We've been able to increase capacities on some of our local roadways," he said. "We've replaced bridges."

Many of the problems that the parish faces now are, to Cooper, primarily the result of the Parish Council's dysfunction.

"I govern as an executive," he added. "And I expect the legislative body to be a legislative body."

Off-kilter budget

Voters in St. Tammany Parish have become famously reluctant to approve any taxes at the ballot box.

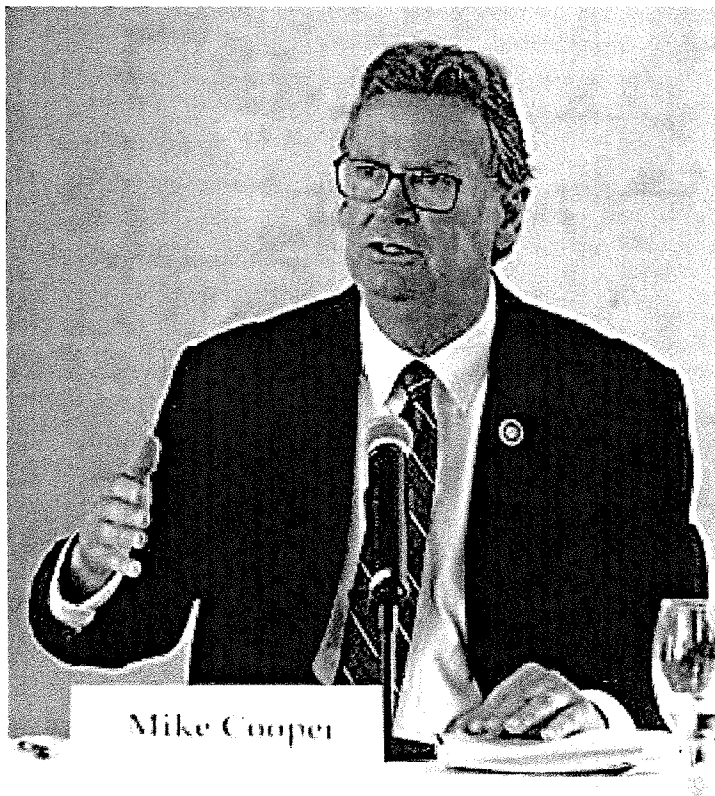
But some expenditures — like court and medical services in the jail — are state mandated. And voters do want roads built and drainage systems expanded. Pandemic emergency funds from the federal and state governments provided a temporary stopgap for some of the parish's budget woes. Those funds have all but dried up.

"If you put any kind of tax referendum on the ballot right now, the public is going to laugh at you, because they don't trust the government," Cromer said.

He sees the parish's budget struggles as a product of the failures of communication between Cooper, the council, and other government agencies. He hopes to convene everyone with a stake in the budget to settle budget disputes without raising taxes on people in the parish.

Cromer thinks Cooper has lagged behind the issue. "He's known this is coming for four years," Cromer said. "And he hasn't addressed it."

Cooper said he tried — but a recalcitrant Parish Council prevented him from seeing some of his plans through. He asked the council to reallocate a portion of the parish's sales tax, he noted. "Council members at that point said, 'No, we're never going to do that, people want their roads and bridges,'" he said. "Well, of course they do, but we're at a critical time here."



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“Look, I get along with everyone,” Cooper said. When he took office, he said council members expressed an interest in “working with” him. “Ultimately, they wanted me to work for them,” he said.

The pace of development

Cromer’s first priority would be brokering peace between the different branches of parish government. Second, he’d balance the budget. “Then we can start to tackle the infrastructure and quality of life projects that are necessary in the parish,” he said.

Cooper said limiting unbridled development during his first term in office was an important accomplishment.

“The public was clamoring for a slowdown of growth and more infrastructure. That has been a big, big focus of my administration for the past three and a half years,” he added.

Recently, Cooper and the council have sparred over one particular development — the 100-unit proposed apartment complex on Claiborne Hill, on the outskirts of Covington.

The council felt blindsided by the project and didn't hear about it until it was too late to oppose it, and blamed Cooper for allowing it to move forward while keeping the council in the dark. Cooper feels that it was the developer's responsibility to alert the council about the project, not his.

He proposes a simple fix: He wants to require developers to disclose on permit applications whether or not they've reached out to the local council member about their projects. That, he hopes, will reduce the chances of this kind of controversy repeating itself.



St. Tammany Parish President Mike Cooper and Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer come together on Dec. 6, 2022 for the sealing and dedication of a COVID-19 Time Capsule, to be opened in 2122. The two men are squaring off in the race for the parish presidency on Oct. 14.

PHOTO BY GRANT THERKILDSEN

Working with a new council

Only eight of 14 council incumbents are running for reelection, and all but one face at least one opponent. It's guaranteed that there will be six new faces on the next Parish Council — and possibly as many as 13.

For Cooper, that's good news. "I'm committed to establishing relationships early," he said.

"I've got relationships with all of the existing council members now," Cromer said, "but I'm meeting and trying to get to know all of these new people who are running now."

Between Cooper's incumbent advantage and Cromer's slate of endorsements, the election may be tight. If Cromer wins, a freshman parish president will take office alongside a council packed with newcomers. If Cooper hangs on to his position, he'll be working with a very different council.

Either way, come January, St. Tammany's parish government may look very different than it does now.

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