

Lewiston race tests whether tough talk on welfare still wins Maine elections

By Michael Shepherd, Bangor Daily News Staff
Posted Oct. 04, 2015, at 7:34 a.m.

LEWISTON, Maine — Mayor Robert Macdonald has been elected twice in Maine's second-largest city, but statewide, he's best known for controversial comments about welfare recipients and immigrants — or both.

In late September, he made headlines again after calling for a state website listing the names of welfare recipients and the lengths of time they've received aid, along with their addresses. He was interviewed by Fox News, celebrated by conservative pundits and denounced by liberals.

It provided more fodder for state Democrats, who are working to replace Macdonald with Ben Chin, a political activist with the progressive Maine People's Alliance who came to Lewiston to attend Bates College.

But outside attention around the mayor's comments may not change Lewiston voters' minds much, said Jimmy Simones, who owns Simones' Hot Dog Stand in the downtown.

He said Macdonald, a retired police detective who won election in 2011 as a political outsider, is known here, for better or worse.

"I think they already have their minds made up about Mayor Macdonald," Simones said.

The officially nonpartisan race, which also includes three other candidates — Stephen Morgan, Luke Jensen and Charles Soule — provides a tantalizing partisan contrast in Maine's second-largest city, which has been changed by immigration like no other place in Maine over the last decade, with 7,000 Somalis now living in the region.

Lewiston is a traditional Democratic stronghold with 6,000 more Democrats than Republicans, but Republican Gov. Paul LePage, a Lewiston native, won the city with more than 50 percent of votes en route to re-election in 2014. His central issue, then and now? Welfare reform.

He and Macdonald have won their offices twice behind tough talk about people on public assistance. A third term for Macdonald could further validate it as a winning argument in Maine.

But a Chin victory would illuminate a path for Democrats to fight it, and that machine is doubling down on the race: He raised \$34,000 for his campaign through June, dwarfing the \$19,000 raised in all municipal races in Lewiston and Auburn combined.

"If Chin wins, the message to the state's going to be that Lewiston is a Democratic city, so that's frustrating," said Stavros Mendros of Lewiston, who chairs the Androscoggin County Republican Committee and has supported Macdonald before.

"But on the other hand, if Bob pulls it out, it sort of blows all that up."

Macdonald's welfare argument has worked so far. But did he go too far this time?

In Macdonald's first campaign, he said too many people came to Lewiston for welfare. His runoff opponent, Mark Paradis, died of cancer days before the election, but Macdonald won election by just 70 votes and he was the frontman on a city crackdown on welfare fraud.

In 2012, the mayor made national headlines for telling Somalis in a BBC documentary to “leave your culture at the door.” But it didn’t hurt him. He won his next campaign against former Mayor Larry Gilbert, a well-known Democrat, with nearly two-thirds of votes.

Earlier this year, Macdonald worked with Republican legislators in an effort to allow cities and towns to stop providing General Assistance to asylum seekers, who can’t work under federal rules for at least six months after they submit an application. That effort died when LePage failed to veto a bill that was amended by legislators to allow aid.

But the mayor’s recent call for a welfare registry in his column for the Twin City Times put him back in the news. He said “the public has a right to know how its money is being spent.” Chin denounced him, saying on Facebook that the mayor was trying to “publicly embarrass the poor.”

For Paul Breton of Lewiston, who previously voted for Macdonald, that was a step too far. He called it “welfare shaming,” saying once the public knows who gets assistance, they’ll be deemed “guilty.”

But Nelson Peters Jr., a former city councilor and Republican who served with Macdonald as a police officer and supports Macdonald, said he’s right on welfare.

“We have elderly people who have been in Lewiston for 50 years, 60 years, having trouble paying their taxes,” Peters said. “Those are the people we should be helping, not people looking for asylum.”

An argument for a hard line on welfare has power in Lewiston, said Rep. Michel Lajoie, a Democrat and former city fire chief.

Once, when he was campaigning, Lajoie said a constituent pointed to a nearby house with three cars in the driveway. The man complained because he saw the homeowner in line at the store using food stamps.

“When the mayor campaigned the first time, he did bring it up to light,” Lajoie said, “and apparently, it’s what sold the program.”

But Chin has an unprecedented amount of money and organizers behind him.

Chin will have two clear advantages over Macdonald: Money and paid organizers for the campaign. The vote is in November, but with a wrinkle — if no candidate wins 50 percent of votes, the top two candidates go to a runoff election no more than 45 days later.

His high-dollar campaign is being run in concert with his employer: Genevieve Lysen, the Lewiston-area organizer for the Maine People’s Alliance, is managing it, and in August, he gave a speech outside a building that a report from the group said was owned by one of the city’s “worst slumlords.”

That effort will be supported by the Maine Democratic Party, which has an organizer working on Lewiston City Council campaigns. Rachel Irwin, a spokeswoman for the party, said it backs Chin “100 percent” and will do get-out-the-vote work on his behalf.

She said Chin, who is running on a progressive plan that includes building 100 units of resident-owned housing and establishing an Office of New Americans to help immigrants learn English and become American citizens, is “really going in there to shake up the dialogue around welfare and other issues.” Irwin called Macdonald “a disgrace.”

“I can’t begin to tell you how important Lewiston is to us,” Irwin said.

The situation is less certain in the Maine Republican Party: Along with Macdonald, Morgan and Jensen are Republicans, and Jason Savage, the party’s executive director, said it’s assessing the race and wouldn’t commit to any involvement in it before or after a runoff election.

However, he said Chin would be “a destructive force for the property taxpayers of Lewiston.”

Macdonald reported raising \$3,500 for his last campaign, and he has said he won't try to match Chin. Mendros said if it came to a runoff between Macdonald and Chin, he'd push for party support.

Douglas Hodgkin, an emeritus professor of politics at Bates College and a Republican activist, said it's an important race for the city's “bully pulpit.”

“The mayor isn't a particularly powerful position, but it certainly can set a tone,” he said.

That tone is important to Mohamed Ibrahim, an immigrant from Djibouti who came to Lewiston in 2012. He has helped Chin organize because he believes the city needs a mayor to “focus on the real issues, not to put more pressure on poor people.”

“Not as an immigrant, but as a resident of Lewiston, what I'm really inspired with is the path that Ben Chin is taking,” he said.

Peters, the Macdonald supporter, said Chin's large amount of money could backfire with voters: Of his haul, just over \$24,000 came from Maine and \$5,000 from Lewiston, with the rest from out-of-state donors.

“It makes you wonder, ‘Why do these people want to get involved in what's going on in Lewiston, Maine?’” he said. “If Ben Chin gets elected, you're going to see taxes go up.”

<http://bangordailynews.com/2015/10/04/the-point/lewiston-race-tests-whether-tough-talk-on-welfare-still-wins-maine-elections/> printed on October 26, 2015