

SMH board candidates file to run as a slate

‘Medical freedom’ trio includes Flynn’s sister

Earle Kimel

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Three candidates for the Sarasota County Public Hospital Board – including one of the most outspoken critics of Sarasota Memorial Hospital’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic and a sister of former National Security advisor Michael Flynn – have filed to run as a “medical freedom” slate.

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Three candidates filed to run for the Sarasota County Public Hospital Board on a “medical freedom” slate. PROVIDED BY SARASOTA MEMORIAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

SMH

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The recent filings mean the campaign for at least one of the four seats up for election this year will feature a closed Republican primary on Aug. 20, with the winner facing a Democrat in November, while two of the seats may be decided via open primaries in which all voters participate.

At-Large Seat 2, which currently would be decided Nov. 5, has Democrat and Englewood resident John Lutz opposing Republican Kevin Cooper in a bid to succeed Tramm Hudson, who is retiring.

The candidate qualifying period runs from noon June 10 through June 14.

The nine-member public hospital board sets policy for the Sarasota Memorial Health Care System, which includes all Sarasota Memorial Hospital campuses, related healthcare facilities and clinics and First Physicians Group.

The hospital system is Sarasota County's largest employer, with 10,000 workers who deal with about 1.5 million patient visits each year through all of its facilities and physician practices.

The partisan hospital board races had historically been low-profile prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted a "Health Freedom" slate of candidates to run for four of five seats in 20

22.

Three of those four candidates won seats on the board ushering in a new, more contentious era for the policy-making body. The slate campaigned on skepticism about the effectiveness of COVID-19 vaccines, social distancing and mask mandates and harshly criticized Sarasota Memorial's patient care during the pandemic.

They pushed for the hospital to commission an independent study of its practices during the pandemic, which concluded the hospital exceeded the performance level of many facilities nationally and in Florida, generating a public backlash at several board meetings last year.

A combination of the hospital board's open mic policy for public comment and subsequent postings on social media turned once placid board meetings into a national culture war stage.

Both the hospital administration and the medical freedom proponents pushed to pack the boardroom with

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speakers espousing their point of view. That created a scene with long lines of people screened through metal detectors.

After the board voted to approve the COVID evaluation, hospital personnel were subjected to death threats both by voicemail and electronic media – something that medical freedom advocates also decried.

Organizers of a local Facebook group, the Sarasota Memorial Hospital Transparency Project, called for the end of SMH's taxing authority and sovereign immunity shield against lawsuits.

The most prominent political figure linked to the upheaval was retired Lt. Gen. Flynn, who attended the hospital board meeting early last year and later wrote on social media that the meeting "could have been a rebuilding of trust" but "further damaged this institution with a 'fox inside the henhouse investigation.' They didn't address the meat of the issues that County taxpayers (the real owners of the hospital) wanted to hear.

"Their little report is not the end of the investigation. More to follow."

Commenting later on public remarks made by then-hospital board chairman Tramm Hudson, Flynn wrote that "It may be time to privatize this hospital."

The uproar eventually died down, after a majority of the hospital board declined a push for a second "independent" look at the hospital's COVID-19 response.

Sister of former Trump advisor Michael Flynn joins race

North Port resident Mary Flynn O'Neill, who filed March 14 for At-Large Seat 3, noted in a news release that she is joining At-Large Seat 1 candidate Tamzin Rosenwasser and Central District Seat 1 candidate Tanya Parus on a platform of "Preserve our Community Hospital and Health Freedom."

All three candidates are Republicans. O'Neill – the sister of Michael Flynn, who lives in south Sarasota County – is running against fellow Republican Pam Beitlich in what is currently the only

closed primary race, with the winner set to face Democrat George Davis on Nov. 5.

O'Neill is a North Port resident, and executive director of America's Future, Inc., a non-profit organization chaired by her brother dedicated to, according to O'Neill's release, "protecting our God-given rights, American values and traditions, and preserving our Republic."

"I am committed to ensuring our community hospital, Sarasota Memorial Hospital, remains publicly supported while respecting health freedoms of our county's citizens," O'Neill said in a printed release. "SMH has served us well since 1925.

"I want to ensure the public can trust our community hospital to continue doing so into the future without undue outside influence."

The two other candidates on the slate are running against incumbent Republicans in what are currently open primaries,

Parus will try to unseat current Hospital Board chairwoman Sarah Lodge and Rosenwasser will try to unseat Sharon Wetzler DePeters.

COVID-19 response critic seeks a seat at the table

Parus, one of the most vocal advocates for the idea of "medical freedom" – and critic of the way SMH was run during the pandemic – said in a prepared statement that her "main focus will be to bring full accountability and transparency to our hospital and advocate for all residents in Sarasota County."

In a news release, Parus reiterated her criticism of a March 2023 report generated by the hospital's Quality Control Committee that showed SMH responded well to the crisis.

"The community demanded full accountability and transparency from the hospital board regarding what really happened during this time. We wanted an independent audit of treatment procedures and how protocols were determined. Instead, the management and board produced a whitewashed report," Parus said.

Parus – the president of the Sarasota County chapter of Moms For America – is married mother of three and a former EMT who helped Vic Mellor found the "We the People Health and Wellness Center," in Venice, was also a vocal supporter of an October 2023 resolution adopted by the Sarasota County Commission that, among other things, supporting a patient's rights to choose medical care with informed consent.

Longtime physician opposes 'medical corporatists'

Rosenwasser, a physician with dual board certifications in internal medicine and dermatology, was a staff physician in the Emergency Room at St. Louis Regional Medical Center prior to its closure.

She has practiced dermatology in Indiana, New Hampshire and Florida.

She is also the current treasurer and past president of the Association of American Physicians and Surgeons, a nationwide association founded in 1943 which has a motto of "Omnia pro Aegrotis" which means "All for the Patient."

In a news release, Rosenwasser said that she is opposed to "medical corporatists" running medical care as well as any federal government mandates in medical care.

Rozenwasser also noted that she is a "vehement proponent of public hospitals answerable to the voters."

Sarasota Memorial and Lee Health are the only two public hospitals in Florida that are overseen by elected boards of directors, though SMH is empowered to levy a property tax but Lee Health is not.

The current tax rate is 1.042 mills – roughly half of its 2-mill limit – and accounts for about 5% of its operating revenue. One mill is equal to \$1 per \$1,000 of taxable property value.

Those funds help offset a portion of the cost of vital programs other hospitals in Sarasota have eliminated or never offered, such as labor and delivery, maternity service newborn intensive care, a trauma center and inpatient psychiatric services.