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Bush names black lawyer to judgeship

By LYDIA LUM
Staff

Four months after Harris County voters ousted all but one minority judge from the district courts, Gov. George W. Bush's first judicial appointments include a black lawyer from Houston.

If confirmed by the state Senate, Dwight Jefferson would preside over the 215th District Court and serve the remaining two years of an unexpired term.

Jefferson would join Lupe Salinas of the 351st District as the only minority judges among 59 at the county's district court level.

Straight-ticket Republican voting in the November election swept from the district courts two black jurists and three Hispanic incumbents, reigniting debate over whether judges should be elected on a partisan basis. The five judges ran as Democrats.

The governor's nomination of Jefferson -- an insurance defense litigator who ran unsuccessfully for county attorney as a Republican in 1992 -- drew praise.

Harris County GOP leaders said the presence of a black Republican judge will boost their efforts to recruit minority candidates for the judiciary, which they had announced after last fall's Republican landslide.

"We want to recruit qualified minorities, without having an affirmative action program," said Merri Easterly, executive director of the Harris County Republican Party. "We're delighted with the governor's choice. And Dwight has always been popular among party activists."

Not all black Republicans have fared successfully in local campaigns.

In 1982, state District Judge Kenneth Hoyt lost in the GOP primary when he sought re-election. Hoyt had been appointed to a court vacancy by Republican Gov. Bill Clements. Hoyt eventually became a state appeals judge and the highest ranking black Republican jurist. He is now a federal judge.

Jefferson, 38, would replace Judge Eugene Chambers, who stepped down after being elected to a county court-at-law post in November.

Election for the 215th District, a civil court, is next year and Jefferson said he plans to be a candidate. "I wouldn't have accepted this if I didn't have an interest in a longer term," he said.

Jefferson has worked for the Coats, Rose, Yale, Holm, Ryman & Lee law firm since 1988. He also has been a plaintiff's lawyer and is a former assistant city attorney for Houston.

His political debut was in 1992, when he lost a bid to unseat County Attorney Mike Driscoll. The effort made Jefferson the first black Republican nominee for a high-profile Harris County post.

Jefferson's law degree is from the University of Texas at Austin. While on an athletic scholarship at UT, he earned a bachelor's degree in government. He also was a 1978 all-Southwest Conference football selection as a defensive end.

Jefferson said he hopes his nomination will spur other minorities to consider running on the GOP ticket. "The governor obviously is taking strides to include people of color in the party," he said.

In announcing Jefferson's nomination Friday, the governor also tapped two other judges, one of them black, to fill vacant judicial seats in North Texas.

State District Judge Carolyn Wright, who is black, was nominated as justice of the 5th Court of Appeals in Dallas. State District Judge William Brigham, who is white, was nominated as justice of the 2nd Court of Appeals in Tarrant County.

Bush spokeswoman Karen Hughes said the appointments reflect the governor's commitment to ethnic diversity.

"His first standards are integrity and excellence," Hughes said. "But he believes the judiciary also needs qualified blacks, qualified Hispanics, people from all walks of life."

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