

## LOCAL NEWS

### **Fulton Commission candidate comes out**

Bickers says she's gay in meeting, but later distances herself from comments

By RYAN LEE

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Mitzi Bickers — the former Atlanta School Board president seeking to become the next chair of the Fulton County Commission — told a group of gay Democrats this week that she is a lesbian.

But two days later, she distanced herself from the comments and said she was answering a hypothetical question.

Bickers is one of four candidates seeking to replace former Fulton County Commission Chair Mike Kenn, who resigned Aug. 1 to head a transportation lobbying group.

"It is tough as a gay woman to run as a gay candidate," Bickers told a meeting of the Georgia Stonewall Democrats on Monday. "It's tough for a black woman to run as a gay candidate, particularly for a black female who's a preacher at a Southern Baptist church."

But two days later in an interview with Southern Voice, Bickers denied that she came out as gay during the Stonewall meeting. Instead, Bickers said she was discussing how a gay black candidate would fare among African-American voters in south Fulton County.

Bickers, 37, is a pastor at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Atlanta.

With Bickers and former Fulton County Commissioner Karen Webster Parks — both African-American women — predicted to split the Democratic vote, constituents knowing her sexual orientation would cost Bickers black votes, she said during the Stonewall meeting.

Bickers told the group she is gay during candidate interviews for its endorsement, which Bickers later received.

"We think Fulton County needs someone who can bring consensus to the board and to the county," said Bob Whitelaw, chair of the Stonewall Democrats. "So we're looking for someone who had experience with doing that."

Whitelaw would not confirm whether Bickers came out as gay during the meeting and called her statement "ambiguous."

"It would have been much different if she would have said, 'I, as a gay woman,'" Whitelaw said. "I don't think the statement itself is an 'admission' to anything."

**Republican Karen Handel** — with more than 30 endorsements, including her former boss Gov. Sonny Perdue and gay GOP group Georgia Log Cabin Republicans — also interviewed for the Stonewall endorsement. But the board found that she didn't understand gay issues, according to Whitelaw.

“She’s a very pleasant lady, and we were happy to have her there, but it’s clear she doesn’t have a clue as to what it is like to be a gay person in Fulton County,” Whitelaw said.

Webster Parks, 43 and Milton Farris, 49 — a Republican who is also a former county commissioner — did not attend the Stonewall meeting.

### **Bickers’ record**

Bickers spent the early part of her session with Stonewall touting her 10-year tenure on the Atlanta Board of Education.

Entering a school board that was “a laughing stock” around the country, Bickers helped to restore civility and direction during her terms, which included being both vice president and president for two years each, she said.

In discussing her plans to expand the domestic partner benefits legislation passed by the Fulton commission in July to include a variety of families, Bickers signaled she would like to go off the record during the public meeting without asking reporters at the session if they agreed to her condition.

Bickers then said people ask her why she won’t run as a gay candidate. Bickers also explained that if a black candidate came out as gay, some African-American voters would likely drop their support.

There were no follow-up questions about Bickers sexual orientation during the meeting. She declined to answer questions about her sexual orientation from a reporter after her session with Stonewall.

On Wednesday, Bickers also would not comment on her sexual orientation, other than to say her campaign would suffer if reports that she came out surfaced.

“I did not come out to a group,” she said. “What I was giving were hypotheticals and trying to get people to understand that we live in a homophobic society.”

Whitelaw said debate over Bickers’ sexual orientation did not factor into the endorsement from Georgia Stonewall Democrats.

“She’s the only one who knows why she said what she said, and what she was trying to say,” Whitelaw said Wednesday. “I think she was stating the reality of life of gay and lesbian people in Georgia. I think she was talking in the third person.”

When Whitelaw was a candidate for the state House in 2001, he mentioned his partner in campaign literature. “I decided to do that because, number one, it’s honest,” Whitelaw said at the time.

But he said this week that gay candidates aren’t required to do so.

“I chose to do that as an individual,” Whitelaw said. “I don’t have a right to out anyone unless they’re a public figure and they’re acting against the gay community.”

Bickers lists her parents and 2-year-old son on campaign literature distributed during the meeting on Monday, but the brochure does not include any information about a partner.

On Monday, Bickers said she supports creating a registry for all gay Fulton County residents to formally recognize their partnerships.

### **Handel 'on board'**

**Handel**, 41, told Stonewall members she opposed creating a registry because she didn't believe such a list would remain secure and private. But she has indicated support for domestic partner benefits.

"When I hear the word registry, I get a sick feeling that we're creating a list of people," she said. "What would happen if somebody got that list?"

**Handel** continues to work closely with Georgia Log Cabin Republicans, which endorsed her, said Marc Yeager, the group's president.

"We remain having a great relationship with Karen," Yeager said. "She's definitely on board with Log Cabin and a lot of our issues. She's been visible and active in the gay community with her campaigning and has made herself known."

**Handel** is a member of Log Cabin Republicans and attends numerous gay events, including Atlanta Pride in June and a Human Rights Campaign barbecue in August.

"I don't think, perhaps as a party, [Republicans] have been as open-minded about things as we should have," **Handel** said Monday. "Even though I'm a Republican, I don't agree 100 percent with the things in the platform."