

Outgoing Chair Laning says Dems need to be more active in Supreme Court races

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Outgoing Dem Chair Martha Laning has nothing but respect for judicial candidates who turn down help from political parties because they want to keep politics out of the Supreme Court.

She also says they need to change.

Reflecting on her four years as party chair, Laning said Wisconsin Dems need to become more engaged in state Supreme Court races, even if candidates aligned with them philosophically are hesitant to accept the help. Her comments come after Appeals Court Judge Lisa Neubauer's loss in the spring election, spoiling liberals' hopes of taking over philosophical control of the court.

Laning likened it to candidates for state office who detest money in politics and decide to place limits on their fundraising.

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"The reality is if you do that yourself right now, you really diminish your opportunity to win so that you can help create guidelines in the future, get people elected to the Supreme Court to get money out of politics," Laning said in an interview with WisPolitics.com.

In 2018, the state GOP was the biggest donor for Sauk County Judge Michael Screnock, making \$412,905 in donations as he lost to then-Milwaukee County Judge Rebecca Dallet. This spring, the state GOP made \$134,168 in in-kind donations to Brian Hagedorn, who transferred \$150,000 to the state GOP in the weeks leading up to the April 2 election. By law, a donor can't earmark money given to a committee,

and Hagedorn's campaign said it was transferred for GOTV and party activities.

Meanwhile, the state Dem Party made in-kind donations of \$31,086 to Neubauer in the final week of the campaign. In 2018, Dallet listed an in-kind contribution of \$3,564 in the final week of the race.

"We just need to be sure that all candidates, that we level the playing ground and we don't have one party that's heavily weighing in and another party that's not," Laning said.

In looking back on her four-year term, Laning said she's most proud of increasing the party's fundraising and building out the staff with 11 positions compared to seven when she started.

The party raised \$6.2 million in 2018 through its regular state account and another \$512,068 in the fund that can accept corporate contributions.

In 2014, the last off year, before Laning became chair, the party raised \$4.1 million. Still, she also has operated under a new set of fundraising laws that Republicans put in place just before her term began that formally lifted restrictions on how much a political party can raise and put into law a provision allowing corporate contributions.

Looking ahead, Laning said the party needs to expand candidate services to focus on those running for local offices, as well as the Legislature. She said the party has hired a training director and is looking to help train campaign managers for local candidates, among other things.

She also said the party needs to up its digital game, noting the false information that can be circulated on social media. That includes efforts by Russia to influence U.S. elections.

"We need more investments in that area so that we can be sure that accurate information is getting out to the voters and that we can combat, that we have the ability that when something is done that we see as unethical or wrong, that we have a response to that — a rapid response," Laning said.

Listen to the full interview:

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