

Behnke carries five-way GOP primary for 89th Assembly District

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Oconto businessman Elijah Behnke carried the GOP primary for the 89th Assembly District's special election.

Behnke, 37, finished the night with 44.5 percent of the vote, according to tallies by the Associated Press. His closest opponents, real estate broker Mike Kunesh and businesswoman Debbie Jacques finished with 23.4 and 20.8 percent of the vote respectively.

Additionally, university instructor Mike Schneider finished with 7 percent of the vote and farmer David Kamps carried 4.3 percent.

Behnke told WisPolitics.com he was surprised he had a "domination victory," but he praised his team's ground game for the win.

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"People saw that I cared the most and I put the most effort into it," he said. "And when it was below zero, I was jogging to 100 houses a day. So hard work pays off, and it's that Wisconsin work ethic that will do me well in Madison."

Behnke said he feels confident he'll carry the seat in the next election against Dem candidate Karl Jaeger, who also ran against former AD 89 Rep. John Nygren, R-Marquette. Nygren resigned from his position last fall shortly after winning reelection to take up a job as CEO of the Wisconsin Association of Health Plans.

Kunesh got the most outside backing ahead of the primary, according to filings with the state Ethics Commission.

The Wisconsin Realtors Political Fund spent \$150,000 backing Kunesh on radio, mail

and digital ads. Meanwhile, the Wisconsinites for Liberty Fund spent \$20,000 on mail attacking Jacques of being “Wisconsin’s Swamp Dweller.” A mail piece shared with WisPolitics.com accused her of “Unethical behavior. Gaming the taxpayers. Defrauding small business.”

Meanwhile, Jacques’ campaign sent a mailer hitting Kunesh that a vote for “‘Krooked Kunesh’ is a vote for the Madison swamp.” The mailer alleged an ethics complaint against Kunesh filed with the Green Bay district attorney could result in a felony charge.

Pre-primary fundraising reports showed Behnke trailed both Kunesh and Jacques in fundraising over the first month of the year. But insiders had credited him for hitting doors the hardest.

“I feel like my chances are very good because, going into this, I wasn’t the big money candidate,” Behnke said. “I had no political experience and I took them down swinging.”