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A real alternative to Benavides and Bernero

By DANIEL STURM

Melissa Sue Robinson is probably the most unusual candidate in this mayoral race. Robinson's name will appear on the Aug. 5 primary ballot as herself, and for clarity also includes her former identity, as Charles Edward Staelens Jr.

That was the name Robinson carried until she sold her 25-year-old home improvement business to a partner in 1998. Then Robinson underwent a sex change and began living as the woman she had always longed to be. After several years of hormone therapy to develop breasts and psychological therapy, Charles became Melissa.

Robinson chose the name Melissa after her sex change because it means honeybee in Greek. "I'm a hard worker," she said.

The candidate, 52, said she had to sacrifice her business to become a new person, because she knew that the men working for her would have a hard time dealing with her sex change. But the self-starter, who's now an administrator for SBC Communications, says she isn't the type of person who likes working for someone else. "I'm a leader, not a follower."

That's one reason, after her first taste of politics while running unsuccessfully for an at-large seat on City Council in 1997, Robinson decided to run for mayor. "Lansing citizens really helped me in my business. I want to give back what I was able to take from them. I love Lansing."

Robinson's biography makes her an alternative choice to Bernero and Benavides, and her campaign platform also offers an interesting agenda. Robinson, who directs the National Association for the Advancement of Transgendered People in Lansing, said she would work to pass a hate-crime ordinance within three to six months if elected mayor. She also believes the city schools could be improved if City Council were made responsible for them and the Board of Education placed in an advisory role. "We're losing our students, and some of our schools are in terrible condition," she said.

Robinson suggests giving principals and superintendents annual report cards, like managers. "If they do a good job in management, we will reward them. Otherwise we'll replace them."

Like Bernero and Benavides, Robinson is an unabashed supporter of Lansing's largest corporate citizen, General

Motors. Her twin brother, Warren Staelens, is a GM employee who works in the Cadillac Plant. "I would do anything in my power to keep GM in the city," said Robinson.

Robinson has attacked Virg Bernero over his support for Senate Bill 230 (the red-tagged house demolition proposal) and on other issues. In the Capital City Political Journal, a publication produced by Robinson's campaign manager, Christine Timmon, an image of "snake in the grass" Virg is depicted on the front cover, with graffiti horns and a forked tongue. This hopeful candidate's campaign certainly has brought creativity to the mayoral race.

Robinson says she plans to spend the rest of her life in politics. If not elected mayor, the newcomer says she will run for the school board election in November, for City Council at-large in 2004, and if those attempts fail she'll run for mayor again in 2005.

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