Thrasher 'prepared to bring different perspective' to FSU

The News Service of Florida
Published: Thursday, May 29, 2014 at 7:45 p.m.

TALLAHASSEE -- Widely viewed as the leading candidate for the post, powerful Sen. John Thrasher filed his resume and letter of interest Thursday to become president of Florida State University.

The submittal came more than a week after a presidential search committee voted 15-9 to "pause" the search so it could interview only Thrasher, a former House speaker who serves as chairman of Gov. Rick Scott's re-election campaign. The interview is set for June 11.

In the four page letter, Thrasher outlined his "long-term, sustained support" for his alma mater, work to bring legislative dollars for programs such as the FSU College of Medicine and new campus facilities, and a desire to advance the school "through the next critical steps on its way to national prominence."

"I would strive to take what I have learned during my decades of public service and use those skills and abilities to advance the concerns of my 'new constituents,' the students, staff, faculty and various other stakeholders in the success of our university," Thrasher, R-St. Augustine, wrote.

Thrasher, who earned bachelor's and law degrees from FSU, added that he is "prepared to bring a different perspective about higher education, its roles in society, and how to foster access, affordability, and excellence in education through online learning and other methods."

Search consultant Bill Funk told committee members before they voted May 21 that the "irregular" interview step was needed because Thrasher's "long-shadow" was keeping other qualified candidates from wanting to apply for the job.

Fourteen others have expressed interest in the FSU position, which was vacated April 2 when Eric Barron left for the same post at Penn State University.

Most notable among the other applicants is state Rep. Michelle Rehwinkel Vasilinda, a Tallahassee Democrat who submitted her resume after Thrasher was invited to be interviewed. Thrasher received a letter of recommendation for the post from former FSU president Talbot "Sandy" D'Alemberte.
The search committee's decision has sparked outrage from some student groups and faculty, who have pointed to Thrasher's lack of an academic background and his legislative record, which includes voting to largely eliminate teacher tenure.

In his letter, Thrasher noted he is "not a traditional academic," but that he has higher-education experience through his private legal and legislative work, as well as being a past chair of the FSU Board of Trustees.

"I will be committed to academic freedom, faculty governance, and shared governance responsibility as provided in the university constitution just as I was committed to the specific rules of governance in every public position I have ever held," he wrote.

Thrasher added that he would "pledge to support programs" that promote diversity, "placing an emphasis on having a student body, staff, and faculty that represent Florida."

He also said he would work to strengthen ties with Florida A&M University and Tallahassee Community College.

Thrasher would enter FSU after angering supporters of neighboring FAMU, as he backed a controversial proposal during the recent legislative session that would have moved toward splitting the FAMU-FSU College of Engineering. Ultimately, lawmakers approved a study of the issue.

Elmira Mangum, president of Florida A&M University, told The News Service of Florida on Wednesday that the collaboration between the universities should be a model for other schools.

"We may have to work on how we do it or improve our collaboration, but I think the idea of having the program ... the students want to work together, the faculty want to work together. And it’s more efficient," Mangum said. "But we don’t get to make the final decision."

The FSU Board of Trustees will get an up or down recommendation from the search committee sometime after the June 11 interview.

Before the recommendation is given, Thrasher is expected to take part in additional interviews with student and faculty groups.

**District already in play**

Sen. John Thrasher hasn’t been named president of Florida State University. At least not yet.

But in Tallahassee circles, it's widely assumed Thrasher will get the top job at his alma mater, and that means behind-the-scenes discussions and digging have already started about who might run for Thrasher's solidly Republican Northeast Florida Senate seat.
A large part of the talk focuses on two House members --- Ronald "Doc" Renuart and Travis Hutson --- whose districts overlap Senate District 6, which stretches from Ponte Vedra Beach to Daytona Beach and includes communities such as St. Augustine, Palm Coast and Palatka.

Renuart, a Ponte Vedra Beach Republican and physician, said he intends to run for the Senate seat if it becomes open and pointed to his health-care background.

"As a physician, my knowledge and experiences have me prepared to add my voice to the discussion," Renuart said in an email. "It's been about 12 years since a practicing physician has held a seat in the Florida Senate."

Hutson, R-Elkton, was not as committal when reached by phone, but he said he will consider running for the Senate seat if the opportunity arises.

It's clear Tallahassee lobbyists and groups are preparing for a race in the district. St. Johns County Sheriff David Shoar said his name was included in a poll that tried to gauge the popularity of possible candidates. Shoar said he has no plans to run for the Senate.

"I'm a cop, really, so I'm not sure that would be the life for me, running back and forth to Tallahassee," Shoar said.

The race could have implications outside the district, as Sen. Joe Negron, R-Stuart, and Sen. Jack Latvala, R-Clearwater, wage a battle to become Senate president in 2016. Both are trying to line up support among Senate Republicans, and Thrasher, a savvy insider, has been a key supporter of Negron.