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THE POST EDITORIALS

John Walsh for District Attorney

The former federal prosecutor faces two other Democratic candidates, Beth McCann and Mitch Morrissey, in the Aug. 10 primary to replace outgoing DA Bill Ritter.

The campaign for district attorney of Denver has been an uncommonly thoughtful and civilized affair, and the winner will occupy an important perch as the city struggles with issues of crime and punishment.

Three candidates are vying for the position, each with a vision of law enforcement as a community service.

John Walsh is a former federal prosecutor with top-notch courtroom experience and solid administrative credentials. We think he is the most qualified candidate for the job.

Walsh pledges innovative efforts to combat gun violence, which endangers the whole community. It's his top enforcement priority. "By taking guns out of the hands of criminals, we can dramatically reduce that danger," he says. He also plans fresh efforts to attack white-collar crime, including identity theft and investment scams.

But at the same time, he says he will fight to maintain adequate funding for prevention and treatment programs that are essential to the fight for a safe urban environment.

Walsh has run an energetic campaign and boasts a solid toehold in the community, though he is running from behind when it comes to local political connections. His opponents in the Aug. 10 Democratic primary are former public safety director Beth McCann, who has crafted a fine record of public service; and one of the current deputy district attorneys, capable veteran Mitch Morrissey.

Walsh combines an enviable variety of skills needed to succeed Bill Ritter, who is term limited. Ritter has served three terms in an office that requires a challenging mix of prosecutorial, administrative and investigative skills, as well as good antennae for political and community issues.

Leadership is key in a post where the chief must manage and guide a large team of prosecutors.

The district attorney's key tasks are managing the office and setting policy. Ritter has prosecuted only two cases during his 11 years in office, yet he has been superb in a job that involves regular interaction with the police, city hall, the community and state politicians. His legacy is well worth preserving.

While serving as chief of the Major Frauds Section of the U.S. Attorneys Office in Los Angeles, Walsh successfully prosecuted white-collar criminals in cases that involved narcotics, guns, immigration, smuggling, customs violations and bank robberies. He did so while managing 35 other prosecutors handling high-profile fraud cases.

He was a member of the team that investigated and prosecuted Charles Keating and other officers of California's Lincoln Savings & Loan. He led the investigation of Gov. Fife Symington of Arizona.

Walsh returned to Denver in 1995 and is a fresh face on the political scene. He is full of enthusiasm yet deliberate in his language and his decisions. He will make an effective leader and bring a thoughtful perspective to the office.

Walsh was born in New York City but grew up in Denver. (Certainly being a Colorado native is not a qualification for local office. Our

last three mayors were Federico Peña, born in Texas; Wellington Webb, Chicago; and John Hickenlooper, originally from Vermont.) Walsh graduated in the top 10 percent of his class at Stanford Law School.

Walsh returned to Denver from Los Angeles nine years ago and has specialized in litigation of civil cases and white-collar crimes as a partner in the law firms of Holland & Hart and, currently, Hill & Robbins.

We rarely endorse in a primary election. But in this case, with no Republican contenders, the winner of the Aug. 10 Democratic primary will be the next district attorney. Only registered Democrats and unaffiliated voters who wish to declare a Democratic affiliation at the polls can vote in this contest.

Denver's district attorney traditionally has worked closely with the legislature and in regional and national settings involving law and order issues. Walsh is well qualified to play this broad role.

We were particularly impressed with what Walsh had to say on juvenile diversion and the drug court. While all three candidates are rightly concerned with prosecuting major criminals, the juvenile diversion programs offer the best chance to keep youthful offenders out of the prison system. Fewer than a tenth of the youthful offenders channeled through Denver's diversion programs have landed back in court again. Likewise, the drug court program can ensure that substance abusers get the treatment they need to go straight, rather than just jailing them without treatment for the drug or alcohol problems that led to their troubles with the law in the first place.

Both of those programs have been hurt by the city's budget shortfall. Walsh said he will aggressively seek short-term sources of funding to keep those and other worthwhile programs moving forward. He also will work to prevent juvenile crime by forming a partnership between the DA's office and Denver Public Schools to address bullying, gang violence and substance abuse.

"All too often, the budget ax falls first on prevention and treatment programs," says Walsh. "As district attorney, I will work tirelessly with our Denver legislative delegation and City Council to preserve and expand funding for the DA's office."

Walsh also understands that the recent police shootings are a complex problem that demand a rapid response but must be addressed on several levels, with prevention being the top priority.

"When police shootings do take place, the law enforcement response must be swift, aggressive and effective," Walsh says.

If elected, Walsh will hit the ground running. Early in his campaign, he sat down with Denver's deputy district attorneys to discuss their needs. He has made a point of saying that he is not out to "shake up" the office but to make "incremental, constructive change."

We are impressed with the campaigns and records of McCann, Morrissey and Walsh, and expect that whoever falls short on Aug. 10 will make serious public contributions in other endeavors. But Walsh has an excellent combination of outlook, experience and skills to excel as DA, and we urge his selection.