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Group questions bars' rankings

Lawyers' organizations lack credibility to rate candidates, reform center says

By Bruce Golding
Staff Writer

A White Plains-based judicial reform group has criticized Westchester County's two leading lawyers' groups over their ranking of the local candidates for state Supreme Court in today's election.

The Center for Judicial Accountability said the Westchester County Bar Association and the Westchester Women's Bar Association both denied its requests for biographical information and a blank copy of the questionnaire distributed to the candidates in the Ninth Judicial District.

"The public really has no way of determining whether these ratings are legitimate or whether they are self-serving and politically motivated," center founder Doris L. Sassower said. "It's high

time that the public knows that bar association ratings ... are not necessarily reliable or trustworthy."

The presidents of both groups defended their methods and said the reform group had declined to participate in the process.

Sassower also said that both associations ignored her offer of information concerning two of the candidates, incumbent Republican Justice W. Denis Donovan and Democratic county Judge J. Emmett Murphy.

County Bar Association President Gary E. Bashian confirmed that Sassower was denied the information she requested, saying: "Whatever files we do have are confidential." He declined to elaborate.

Women's Bar Association President Susan L. Pollett likewise

said her group's screening process was confidential and that Sassower did not provide the women's bar with any information.

In its ratings, the county bar association found Donovan, Murphy and Republican county Judge John R. LaCava "highly qualified" for the state bench; the women's bar found all three "well qualified." Democrat Michele Bermel, a lawyer from Chappaqua, was deemed "qualified" by both groups.

A former divorce lawyer and one-time president of the New York Women's Bar Association, Sassower founded the not-for-profit Center for Judicial Accountability after she was indefinitely suspended from practicing law in 1991. She contends that her ongoing suspension is illegal and was intended as punishment for her attempts at judicial reform.