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Bruderly will try to make third time a charm

By NATHAN CRABBE

Sun staff writer

As an engineer, David Bruderly works with numbers.

Yet he's running for Florida's 6th Congressional District seat despite the numbers stacked against him: Running against a nine-term incumbent, losing by a 2-to-1 margin the past two times he ran and a \$2 million fund-raising disadvantage.

"Everyone thinks here's Don Quixote tilting at windmills," he said, before adding he believed he has a legitimate chance to win.

Bruderly this week earned a spot on the ballot by collecting just over the 4,500 signatures needed to avoid a nearly \$10,000 filing fee. Unless someone else puts up that fee before Friday, incumbent Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Ocala, and Bruderly will face each other for the third time in November's general election.

Bruderly, 58, runs an environmental engineering consulting firm in Gainesville. A familiar presence at public meetings wearing a tag or shirt announcing his name and candidacy, he said he'll dedicate most of his time to the campaign in the coming months.

He concedes it will be an uphill battle.

"I'm running against a well-entrenched incumbent who's kept his nose clean and hasn't shot himself in the foot," he said.

Others say he's downright doomed in part because of a district designed to favor the incumbent congressman.

The 6th District is crescent-shaped, capturing parts of Alachua, Bradford, Clay, Duval, Lake, Levy, Marion and Gilchrist counties. Gainesville is sliced in pieces by the



David Bruderly, center, a candidate for U.S. Congress, shakes hands with Chris Chestnut at the Gainesville City Council swearing-in ceremony Thursday at Savannah Grande. (MICHAEL C. WEIMAR/The Gainesville Sun)

crescent, with some minority and student neighborhoods pushed into the district of Rep. Corrine Brown, D-Jacksonville.

Even though it leans more Republican than the rest of Alachua County, there's nearly 20,000 more registered Democrats in the county's chunk of the district. But Republicans outnumber Democrats by nearly 10,000 in the district as a whole.

Bruderly beat Stearns by 248 votes in Alachua County in 2004, but lost the election 65 to 35 percent. Jon Rieskind, chairman of the Alachua County Democratic Party, said he thought Bruderly was a viable candidate - though he did say he hoped for more competition for the seat.

"I want a competitive primary," he said. "I like a competitive primary."

A national Democratic Party source said the race was a low priority, and the party has contributed no money to his campaign. While Stearns had nearly \$2.2 million in his campaign account at the end of March, Bruderly had \$8,000.

Bruderly said he thought the financial disadvantage shouldn't diminish his legitimacy as a candidate.

"When money defines whether someone should be elected, there's something wrong," he said.

He said the major issues remain the same as previous races, including the Iraq war and energy. He opposed the war and supports development of renewable energy sources, saying the unstable situation in Iraq and rising gas prices show he's been right all along.

"I've been long ahead of the curve and people laughed at me," he said. "Cliff laughed at me."

Stearns declined comment through a spokesman, saying it was too early to think about the campaign.

The nine-term congressman is a member of the House veteran's affairs and energy and commerce committees. He touts a law curbing lawsuits against gun-makers among his recent legislative accomplishments and has received repeated accolades from economically conservative groups.

Bruderly said his opponent's support of President Bush will prove to be a liability, due to the president's low approval ratings.

Stearns has voted with the president 86 percent of the time, according to the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

"The thing that has Cliff in trouble this election is his rubber stamping of the president's policies," Bruderly said.