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Locals chime in on Bush's court pick

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OCALA - President Bush's nomination Monday of appeals court judge Samuel A. Alito Jr. to the U.S. Supreme Court drew a mixed reaction locally.

"I'm not disappointed in the gentleman. I think his views are pretty much in line with what all of us would probably want, regardless of political goals," said Pat Sasso, charwoman of Ocala's Republican Federated Women. "I would have liked to have seen a woman there."

Alito's conservative track record, which is similar to current Justice Antonin Scalia's, troubled Fletcher Baldwin, professor of constitutional law at the University of Florida.

"That doesn't bode well for even the conservatives," Baldwin said. "Scalia is not a conservative. . . . He's a reactionary."

The abrupt exit last week of Bush's first nominee for the post, Harriet Miers, wasn't based on her qualifications for the job, Baldwin said.

"I don't know whether she's qualified or not," he said. "I think what they did to her was reprehensible. . . . The extreme group that pushed to get rid of her has much more power than meets the eye."

Ideally, a Supreme Court justice should be "intelligent and learned in constitutional law," said Chief Circuit Judge Victor J. Musleh. He declined to comment on the specifics of Alito's nomination but said Alito appears likely to be confirmed by the Senate.

"He's known as a conservative judge," Musleh noted. "His 15 years on the (appellate) bench, everyone seems to think he's qualified."

Alito's conservative record quickly drew fire Monday from liberal organizations.

The abortion rights group NARAL Pro-Choice America, in a press release, said Alito was "someone who would move the court in a direction that threatens fundamental freedoms." The environmental group Earthjustice sent out a press release with the headline "Halloween Supreme Court Nomination is a Scary Choice."

Sasso said she believes such attacks are unwarranted.

"I do think he's qualified," she said. "I don't think there are reasons to start attacking yet, regardless of what side it is."

The process of selecting Supreme Court justices has become far too politicized on both sides, Baldwin said.

"By God, all we're getting these days is political agendas," he said. "In the old days, we never went through anything like this. People are auditioning for this role now, and that's certainly true of this most recent nominee."

Sasso opposes a single-issue "litmus test," such as a nominee's position on abortion rights, but sees nothing wrong with seeking the person's viewpoint.

"I don't think there's anything wrong with asking that question," she said. "If you're pro, say you are. If you're not, say you are. Once they're on that panel, their minds should be open. They should be thinking about that person, their circumstances."

Marion County Judge John Futch also wants to see an open-minded justice.

"It needs to be someone, clearly, who doesn't have a hidden agenda of any kind," he said. "It needs to be someone open-minded and fair."

Based on Alito's history as an appellate court judge and past writings, Baldwin believes he's likely to be confirmed.

"I doubt that you'll find anything in his background that will disqualify him," Baldwin said. "But I'm sure there will be a lot of yelling and screaming."

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