

Candidate apologizes for tax allegations

By Rob Ryser
Staff Writer

Voters in a certain county Legislature district will find something extraordinary in their mailboxes today — an apology from a political candidate for wrongly calling her opponent a tax delinquent.

The rare apology — from District 5's Republican candidate Maria Kantha to her Democratic opponent, William Ryan — comes only five days before the Nov. 4 election and shows that negative campaigning can carry a price.

Some experts say that price may be the election for Kantha. But others counter that negative campaigning wins elections.

"She doesn't have to worry about winning — that is going to backfire," said Utica-based pollster John Zogby, who works for Democrats and Republicans. "She cleaned up her mess quick, but she made a terrible mistake."

Ira Brody, Westchester's GOP campaign chairman, said that he believed Kantha's mass mailing apology is a first in county politics.

Democrats, meanwhile, hope Zogby's assessment of the situation is right. They point to Kantha's campaign flier last week that falsely accused Ryan of owing \$13,800 in state taxes. The flier had a picture of Ryan with "Wanted" printed at the top and "Tax and Spender" stamped across his face.

"That piece of literature was so vicious that it wasn't even worth making a fair campaign practice complaint," said Adam Bradley, the White Plains Democratic chairman. "It wasn't like all of the other negative campaigning that is happening here. It was designed to imply criminality."

Ryan and the Democrats argue the personal life of candidates should be out of bounds in campaigns. Kantha and the Republicans stand by their tactic. They say personal finances are fair game. They only lament that they got the wrong personal finances.

said she had to work harder and spend more money to get her name known among District 5 voters than Ryan, a former state Assemblyman who lost his seat in 1984 to George Pataki.

Kantha blamed the mistake on a campaign volunteer who got hold of the wrong records. Kantha refused to name the volunteer or explain how he made such an embarrassing mistake.

The state Republican Committee mailed the erroneous information to 30,000 registered voters in the district, which includes White

Plains, Harrison and North Castle. When Kantha discovered the mistake, she kicked the volunteer off her campaign and showed up at Ryan's news conference on Friday to take responsibility.

"I showed up instead of the typical politician who hides," said Kantha, who believes she can win the election.

The Democrats charged that state Republicans helped Kantha's campaign get access to confidential state tax records. State Republicans denied that.

Anyone can review tax records

once the state puts a lien on property for failure to pay taxes, said Kevin Quinn, spokesman for the state Department of Taxation and Finance.

Quinn said it was possible that the Kantha volunteer filed a Freedom of Information Law request and mistook a delinquent tax account for Kantha's opponent.

"If voters are indifferent to this issue, then this tactic has been successful," Ryan said. "But I have faith that the voters of this district are going to see this tactic for what it is."

The reason negative campaigning exists, experts said, is that it often works in favor of the candidate throwing the mud.

"Negative campaigning shifts voters faster than positive campaigning," said Willy Gissen, a former Westchester Democratic Committee official who works for Levin Public Relations and Marketing Inc. in White Plains.

"Even the most well meaning campaign is going to hit up against what all the experience has shown," he said. "That is why they engage in it. It is an empirical fact."

Robert Y. Shapiro, a political science professor at Columbia University, said negative campaigning had a deep effect on races where voters don't have much information about candidates.

"In low-visibility races like these obscure county-level seats, there may be voters out there who take this information seriously," Shapiro said. "That is a reason for worrying about it."

Kantha, a first-time candidate,