

First candidates' debate covers utilities, equality and change

By April Warren
Staff writer

Published: Monday, January 11, 2016 at 10:44 p.m.

Last Modified: Monday, January 11, 2016 at 10:44 p.m.

Debate season kicked off Monday night as candidates for the city of Gainesville's mayoral and District 4 races discussed the city utility, equality and how to change the city for the better.

The debate was co-hosted by the Human Rights Council of North Central Florida and the NAACP and is the first in a slew of candidate forums leading up to the March 15 nonpartisan election.

"Our job tonight is to find out where you stand on certain issues and relay your answers to our community," said co-moderator Evelyn Foxx, president of Alachua County branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The 1 1/2-hour-long debate began with each candidate delivering a two-minute opening statement, followed by five questions each from Foxx and co-moderator Bob Karp, president of the Human Rights Council. The evening ended with closing statements. About 40 members of the public attended the debate, held in the Pride Community Center of North Central Florida located on NW 13th Street, but they did not ask questions.

In the race for mayor, incumbent Ed Braddy is being challenged by former Commissioner Lauren Poe and Donald Shepherd Sr. The mayor and commission seats serve three-year terms.

In his opening statement, Poe focused on what needs to change.

“I believe the largest challenge that Gainesville faces today is equity,” he said. “We have one of the largest income gaps in not just the state but the country.”

Poe said this is isolating and disenfranchising large parts of the community, many of which are minorities. He said a change will come through bold leadership and a change in policy, not by creating more task forces or committees.

Poe said he has three main objectives as mayor: working with major stakeholders to prioritize opportunities for children and youth, having a transportation system that benefits everyone and working to fully fund the city's Parks Recreation and Cultural Affairs master plan, a blueprint of how best to improve the city's public spaces over the next two decades, and the 352 Arts Roadmap, which promotes culture in the city.

Shepherd touted equal opportunity as important to him and as mayor said he would want to grow Gainesville. “I want to take this opportunity in my three-year term to show you what a real leader is about,” Shepherd said.

He called himself an activist for women and asked for voter support.

“I'm the only citizen who has tried to get in that office with you (citizens) in mind,” he said.

Braddy focused on successes during his term, saying that next month Gainesville Regional Utilities ratepayers will see a small reduction in their bills. He also said

important decisions by the City Commission have mostly been approved unanimously despite a politically diverse commission. And he said he has promoted opportunities for minorities and small businesses.

“We’re working together now better than ever before,” Braddy said.

In the District 4 race, Adrian Hayes-Santos, the director of the entrepreneurship master’s program at the University of Florida, is up against Jim Konish, a local property owner and non-practicing attorney for the seat now occupied by Randy Wells, who has reached the end of his term.

District 4 includes land north and south of Southwest Archer Road between Southwest 34th Street and Southwest 13th Street. It also includes the area north and south of Northeast/Northwest 8th Avenue mostly west of 15th Street. The district includes the University of Florida.

“I am concerned about our sky-high GRU bills, I’m concerned by the crumbling infrastructure in District 4; this is some of the oldest infrastructure -- our streets are crumbling,” said Konish, who said he is also concerned about the encroachment of high intensity development on single-family neighborhoods and the politicization of pet projects that takes money away from improving roads.

Hayes-Santos said he wants to make Gainesville “a better place to live, work and play.”

He highlighted protecting neighborhoods -- making sure citizens have walkable development that fits with the neighborhood.

“I want to make our downtown the cultural hub for our region,” he said.

He said he also supports funding the city's Parks Recreation and Cultural Affairs master plan.

When asked by Foxx about the lack of diversity in managerial positions at the city, Braddy said he has voted for minority candidates and under his leadership the Equal Opportunity Office has been "empowered," but more work is needed. Poe said recruitment needs to target places like historically black colleges to make sure Gainesville gets the best and brightest before other places snatch up those candidates.

Hayes-Santos said hiring panels also have to be diverse and attention needs to be paid on training the next generation. Konish called the question "loaded" and said diversity also means hiring people from different political backgrounds as well.

On the topic of supporting same-sex couples, Poe said he supports equality for every human being, an answer echoed by Shepherd. Braddy took the opportunity to talk about a separate issue, but said he supports diversity. Hayes-Santos said he wants Gainesville to be known as a city known for diversity. Konish said as a city commissioner he would have nothing to do with issuing marriage licenses, but believes same-sex marriage is good for business.

As for what the candidates would do for east Gainesville, Hayes-Santos says he calls that area of town home.

"I think one major problem is we need a real transportation system on the east side," he said.

Konish questioned Hayes-Santos' residency status and said someone like himself, who has been buying and rehabilitating properties in east Gainesville should be elected to the commission. Braddy said during his time in office he has included

east Gainesville voices in discussions on the city's future. Poe said the city should partner with Plum Creek Timber Co. to bring development to east Gainesville.

As for recent talk about the city possibly buying the biomass plant, Konish called the idea "a ridiculous proposition" while Hayes-Santos says he supports exploring the idea. Shepherd said the voters should weigh in, while Braddy said the reason the notion can even be entertained now is because the utility is on much firmer footing, thanks in part to his leadership. Poe said it might be too difficult to ask voters to weigh in because if some aspects of the deal remain confidential, voters wouldn't have the entire picture before making up their minds.