

THE LANCASTER NEWS

Candidates address issues at last forum before election



Mick Mulvaney, Republican candidate for the District 16 state Senate seat, makes a point during the Before You Vote 2008 Candidate Forum on Tuesday at the University of South Carolina at Lancaster as his Democrat opponent, Mandy Powers Norrell, checks her notes.

Photo

by Aaron Morrison

October 24, 2008

By Christopher Sardelli - Reporter

Candidates from the five major local elections answered questions at a political forum Tuesday night sponsored by Duke Energy, the Lancaster County Chamber of Commerce and The Lancaster News.

The forum was held at the University of South Carolina at Lancaster's Bundy Auditorium. Outside the auditorium were several tables with signs and information about each of the candidates. The candidates each had two minutes to answer questions, and each were allowed a one-minute closing statement.

Lancaster County school board candidates answered questions first.

Candidates for the District 4 seat are Peter Barry and AnThony Pelham, and candidates for the District 6 seat are Margaret Gamble and Robert Pelot.

Here are some highlights from the session:

QUESTION: There was \$1.2 million less this year in school funding and some programs are in jeopardy. Which would you keep and which would you cut?

Barry: He said he's reluctant to cut many programs and vowed not to go after arts or athletics. "Athletics and academics are a winning combination."

Pelham: There are no particular programs he'd cut right now.

Gamble: "I would not be in favor of cutting anything related to classroom instruction."

Pelot: He said it's hard to say without looking at the budget, or at the status of certain programs.

QUESTION: The school district has three distinct areas: Indian Land, the city of Lancaster and the rural area, including Buford and Kershaw. How will you work to balance resources to meet the needs of these areas?

Pelot: He said he supports conducting a district-wide examination to see what resources are needed. He noted Indian Land's growth, Buford's good schools and said, "I don't see a need for anymore buildings in Kershaw."

Gamble: "We've done an excellent job in meeting the needs of different areas."

Pelham: He said the school district has been proactive in assessing needs of residents, but said, "We could do better and listen to the voices of the citizens in those areas."

Barry: He said there needs to be an updated county-wide strategic plan.

COUNTY COUNCIL DISTRICT 3

County Council District 3 candidates are Wesley Grier and D.W. "Cotton" Cole.

QUESTION: Growth is a key issue in the county. What is the plan to maintain or establish smart growth to balance the needs of business and industry?

Grier: Wants to petition the state to offer more incentives to bring industries to the county, which he said would lead to the creation of more jobs. "Education is growth. We need to make sure we can "sell" our county. We have the workforce to do the jobs. We need to have all the things to draw people into the county."

Cole: "Biggest thing we need to do is take a deep breath and take ahold of our growth." He said he opposes allowing any more large housing developments until the economic slump is over.

QUESTION: With a 12.2 percent unemployment rate in the county, what role should the city play in developing a qualified workforce?

Cole: He wants to re-educate workforce and prepare workers for different industries. "If we don't do something to create jobs, I might have to move to Chesterfield County."

Grier: He said education is an important tool. Disagrees with his opponent about housing developments: "Housing creates jobs – framers, roofers, heating and air conditioning. We need to promote people within this county."

QUESTION: As a concerned citizen, you chose to run. What one thing would you change to improve the quality of life of residents?

Grier: Wants to create safer conditions for children. Also wants to improve right-of-ways on highways.

Cole: "Will work as hard as I can to create jobs for people in this county."

QUESTION: There have been several water issues, from the drought to the Catawba River being named both a scenic river and endangered river. What role would you take to protect natural resources?

Cole: Would designate more wildlife areas in the county.

Grier: He said the county is fortunate that a lot of land has not been developed, because there are several natural resources.

CITY COUNCIL DISTRICT 1, 3 and 4

City Council District 1 candidates are Racarda Blackmon Sr. and Kenneth Hood. District 3 candidates are Audrey Curry and Linda Blackmon-Brace.

District 4 candidates are William "Bill" Sumner and Tamara "Missy" Green.

QUESTION: The city has watched businesses open and close downtown. What is your vision for downtown revitalization?

Blackmon: Since many new businesses fail within the first three years, he wants to develop ways to help those businesses. He wants to be competitive with other cities and also wants to focus on promoting trades and skills in local schools.

Hood: He wants to bring new jobs to the city.

Curry: He recommends offering incentives and tax breaks to any business that moves downtown. Also said downtown needs something unique to draw consumers.

Blackmon-Brace: She agrees with offering incentives to keep businesses downtown.

Sumner: "I'm proud of what's taking place downtown. We need to help businesses stay vital downtown." He also supports incentives and wants to look at ways to attract more businesses.

Green: "I will make sure downtown stays as attractive as possible."

QUESTION: There is a 2 percent hospitality tax from local restaurants and the fund totals over \$1 million. It funds tourism-related activities. How should it be used?

Green: "It should continue to be used for tourism." She will make sure that organizations that have applied for the fund have opportunity to show how they can bring about growth.

Sumner: "The city has awarded many grants to many organizations. We've used the money diligently to provide for the organizations."

Blackmon-Brace: "I would like to see it used correctly ... I would like to see it used on education level."

Curry: "I would change nothing." He said the money is designated for tourism and should not be used for anything else, such as education.

Hood: He said the money has been used correctly.

Blackmon: "We need a way to reach young adults and get them involved."

QUESTION: Forbes.com called Lancaster the most vulnerable city in America based on unemployment, poverty, education and debt ratios. Which area should the city focus on first and how would you improve the problem?

Curry: Would focus on jobs and unemployment, and would work with city and chamber of commerce.

Blackmon-Brace: "My opponent says he cries at unemployment lines, well, so do I." She said she would also focus on unemployment.

Sumner: "We need to seek out economic development and build it."

Green: She said the closing of Springs Global plants here left many people untrained and uneducated. She wants to get those people retrained so they can apply for jobs coming to the county.

Blackmon: "The infrastructure is here, the workforce is present. We need to improve education."

Hood: "Will work with the city and the chamber of commerce to do whatever is necessary."

QUESTION: What makes you the most qualified candidate?

Blackmon-Brace: "I'm ready on Day One. Experience does not mean you're ready to lead. I'm more in touch with the people of District 3."

Curry: "My reason is my 17 years of experience. I think I'm a fair person, I think I'm honest and have more business sense."

Hood: "I have been here all my life. I'm a people person."

Blackmon: He said the city needs someone with business experience and who can manage employees, and he is the right person for the job.

Green: "I have the desire and passion to work for citizens in District 4."

Sumner: "Not one person in District 4 can stand up and say I haven't answered every call."

STATE HOUSE DISTRICT 45 RACE

House District 45 candidates are Republican Deborah Long of Indian Land and Democrat Fred Thomas, a current member of Lancaster County Council.

QUESTION: Is it good or bad to have tax control from Columbia instead of local governments?

Long: She favors local control of decisions. "People don't mind paying for what they get, but they do mind paying for wasteful spending," she said.

Thomas: "It's bad, extremely bad the farther away you get from the problem."

QUESTION: Due to Act 388, the state relies on sales tax as a source of revenue, but the school district has lost over a million dollars. What is the solution?

Thomas: He said the public was misled by Act 388 and said those with expensive homes are benefiting from the property tax cuts instituted by the act. "We're suffering at the school level by using an unstable tax to fund something we need every day."

Long: She said the act came at an unfortunate time. Recommends forming an unbiased panel of economic advisers to monitor decisions in Columbia.

QUESTION: The House and Senate went back to session this week to deal with budget shortfalls. With the possibility of a weak economy in 2009, do you think the current tax system is fair and equitable? Are there any changes that should be made?

Long: Said the government needed to be more responsible with tax money and not award grants to things like hot-air balloon festivals.

Thomas: Doesn't think the tax structure is fair and said it can hurt chances to attract new businesses.

QUESTION: What alternate energy ideas, such as energy-efficient programs and offshore drilling, should be components of a comprehensive energy plan for South Carolina?

Thomas: Would look at wind and solar energy so the state wouldn't have to import "every ounce of energy." Does not support offshore drilling because it could harm local beaches that attract tourists.

Long: Supports incentives for alternative energy, permits to promote energy and the exploration of nuclear or hydrogen energy.

STATE SENATE DISTRICT 16 RACE

Senate District 16 candidates are Mick Mulvaney, a Republican who is the incumbent state District 45 House representative, and Democrat Mandy Powers Norrell.

QUESTION: The ideas of school vouchers and school choice have been publicized in South Carolina. How would you provide best education for children?

Mulvaney: Believes in public school choice. Wants more money from school budgets allocated to classrooms. Interested in expanding charter school options. Also wants to lower drop-out rates.

Norrell: Wants to "eliminate the threat of private school vouchers." She said vouchers take money for public education and give it to private schools. "It's not fiscally conservative."

QUESTION: In Lancaster County, only 18.6 percent of residents have education beyond high school. There is a 12.2 percent unemployment rate and 20 percent of residents live below the poverty line. With limited funding, what can the state do?

Norrell: She said people used to be able to rely on Springs Global to provide jobs and education. Said state needs to look at jobs and education.

Mulvaney: "I believe business can lead economic growth." Wants to support small businesses by reworking workers compensation suits and looking at taxes.

QUESTION: The vehicle sales tax goes to roads. How do we improve the roads system?

Mulvaney: Said he wants to make sure money from car sales tax goes to improve roads.

Norrell: Supports the car sales tax. Wants to begin using chrome rubber process to repave roads, which she said would last longer than asphalt.

QUESTION: With a budget shortfall, money could be taken from education. Is this good or bad for the state?

Norrell: "It's a terrible decision for Lancaster and for the state." Said funding higher education is a priority and the county "needs it desperately."

Mulvaney: "This is the future of Lancaster. The chances for it to be a textile town are gone, but the chances for us to be a university town are tremendous." He said he supported fighting for \$100,000 in additional funding for USCL.

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