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Candidates disagree on council's climate

By Charles D. Perry · & 2008 The Herald

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If District 7 voters believe Chad Williams, they'll see the York County Council as a tumultuous group of bickering politicians.

But if they side with Rick Lee, they'll see a unified body of leaders who, having put past battles behind them, are working together peacefully.

The council's climate is one of Williams' central campaign issues as he tries to unseat Lee, a four-term incumbent.

"If he was talking about this matter two years ago, I would agree," said Lee, a 57-year-old Republican. "There was a lot of turmoil two years ago. But he's way out of date. And as proof of that, I would encourage anybody to go watch a council meeting on television. You can judge for yourself and see for yourself. There's courtesy and professionalism."

Williams, a 42-year-old Democrat, said he's not buying leaders' recent play-nice attitudes, manners he contends are a political front that will disappear after next month's election.

"The discord on the council has gotten progressively worse," Williams said. "Except right before election time. They start getting along much better."

Aside from serving as president of his sixth-grade class, Williams has never held an elected office. He has served 10 years on the Rock Hill Planning Commission and runs a landscape maintenance business, experience he said will help him if he's elected.

For Williams, garbage is a key issue. Although the county ships its household waste to Columbia, he said that's not a viable long-term solution, and local government must be able to handle its trash here.

"It's not a very glamorous issue, but it's something that we have to get a hold of," Williams said. "The bottom line is, we need to take care of it ourselves and not be dependent."

Williams would like the county to open a public landfill or consider building a waste-to-energy incinerator, which burns garbage and produces anything from electricity to road pavement. He admits he doesn't know how much such a facility would cost to build, but he said it's something the council should

consider.

Williams also said the county doesn't do enough to inform the public about its dealings, citing the recent controversy over the proposed expansion of the runway at the Rock Hill-York County Airport. County leaders have admitted they should have told more residents of their plans sooner.

"I don't think that we're listening to citizens enough," Williams said. "Listening involves more than sitting there while people talk during a public hearing."

Williams also supports holding public hearings earlier in the council's voting process.

"Get the input before the majority of the work and the decision's been made," he said.

Williams does agree with Lee on some issues. Both men advocate combing city and county resources to solve problems, and both say the council should follow a land use plan closely.

"Rick and I probably agree on more things than we disagree on," Williams said. "But I think the things we disagree on are significant."

For Lee, the most challenging issue local leaders face is the legal battle between North Carolina and South Carolina over North Carolina's plan to transfer millions of gallons of water a day from the Catawba River to serve the fast-growing cities of Kannapolis and Concord.

"That is an overriding issue because I can always raise money, or the county can, to pave roads and to hire sheriff's deputies and to do the sort of infrastructure work that you need when you're a growing county," Lee said. "We cannot do anything about a shortage of water."

Locally, Lee said he's been leading the charge to protect the county's water resources and has kept the council updated on what's happening.

He's concerned about other issues, too, such as pushing an ordinance that would generate money for public schools by collecting money from developers who are building in the county. He also wants to see the county develop mass transit.

"At some point, there has to be a rail line," he said. "The lifeline of this community, economically, is I-77. And I-77 is governed by how much the gasoline costs or its availability. ... We've got

to be in a position to help people get to their jobs."

Lee touts his experience on the council as a reason why voters should keep him in office. He also points to his votes against tax increases and his efforts to promote local improvement projects, such as the building of the Rock Hill Tennis Center.

Despite their disagreements, both men insist cooperation is critical to an effective council. Whether peace exists, and who the best person is to keep it, will be decided by the voters.

County Council members serve two-year terms and are paid \$15,544 annually. District 7 covers the urban areas of Rock Hill.

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