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Council hopefuls face off at forum

Experience needed, incumbents argue

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With just four weeks to go before the Oct. 4 election, most candidates for the Jefferson Parish Council have yet to explain how they would ensure the parish's financial stability, balance commercial and business development and pay for road and drainage projects of the kind they promised at a forum Tuesday night.

But some candidates used the event to try to distinguish themselves from their opponents, particularly as newcomers attacked current officials for trying to circumvent term limits.

Twenty-two candidates for two parish wide offices and district seats attended the forum at the Crescent City Baptist Church in Metairie, which was sponsored by the Alliance for Good Government.

At-large Division A

John Young, a political newcomer in the race for the at-large Division A seat, stood on the platform and looked at the two Parish Council veterans, Councilmen John Lavarine and Lloyd Giardina, who cannot run again for their current district positions because of term limits.

"They talk about what they're going to do while they're elected," said Young, a top administrator for District Attorney Paul Connick. "What have they been doing for the last five years?"

Giardina and Lavarine quickly countered with their now-standard defense: With five new members sure to be elected to redrawn district seats, the Parish Council needs experienced voices in the at-large posts.

Giardina, R-Westwego, said he would endorse a summit at the start of the new session to set priorities for the parish, a strategy that has proved effective during his past two terms.

"I plan to use my experience of the 24 years that I served on the Parish Council," he said.

Lavarine, R-Kenner, pointed to his support for development of land on Airline Drive and for drainage projects in the 5th District as evidence that he has been an effective councilman.

"My homes in my district do not flood any longer," he said.

Also running in the Division A race is C.A. "Rod" Rodriguez, an Avondale independent. He did not attend Tuesday's forum.

At-large Division B:

Four parishwide candidates listed their professional and civic experience as qualifications for District B, but attorney Pat LeBlanc and state Rep. Tom Capella, R-Metairie, also emphasized term limits that are forcing at-large candidates Nick Giambelluca and Ed Muniz out of their offices.

Giambelluca, R-Metairie, pointed to the massive infrastructure overhaul in traffic and drainage put together by the current council and said experience can keep that going.

"Things are going great," Giambelluca said. "You need the experience and knowledge of how to run parish government."

Capella emphasized his vote in the Legislature supporting the TOPS scholarship program and his position to eliminate discretionary funds.

Muniz, R-Kenner, said experience can help the parish continue receiving federal money for roads and drainage. Addressing a proposal to pass a parish law ensuring a balanced budget mentioned by Capella at a forum last week, Muniz said state law and the Parish Charter already ban deficit spending.

"It's taken care of," Muniz said.

LeBlanc, a Republican from Metairie, attacked the council's unwritten rule of deferring zoning issues to the wishes of each district's representative, saying it fosters unequal application of the law. Noting her service in numerous civic groups and the Parish Charter advisory boards, LeBlanc said she has little experience in politics but is "not a rookie" when it comes to parish government.

4th District

In the most confrontational debate of the night, newcomers Carol Chambers and Jack Rizzuto attacked council candidate Kenner Mayor Louis Congemi, saying that voter-approved term limits were meant to keep "career politicians" out of the Parish Council.

"My opponent has been in office for 21 years, and now he wants to stay at the trough for eight more years," Rizzuto said, adding voters "want to see new faces."

Chambers said electing current public officials to the council would "say goodbye to the best chance our parish has ever seen to get new ideas."

Congemi pointed to his experience and his record in Kenner as qualifications for the job, and he said voters want somebody who knows the issues.

"If you've been to Kenner lately, you know what I've done," he said.

Chambers said she would emphasize implementing the parish's master plan, alleviating traffic and installing emergency backup generators in the drainage pumps.

Rizzuto said he would be the voters' "voice in the Parish Council."

5th District

Only two candidates for the 5th District attended the forum.

State Rep. Jennifer Sneed, R-Metairie, said she would stop commercial encroachment in residential areas and push to create the procedures to implement the recently approved master plan for development.

Sneed also said she would seek to consolidate parish services to save money with the input of civic and business leaders.

Fred Matthew, a member of one of the committees involved in creating the master plan, Envision 2020, said it offers a "great opportunity" to plan development and help the West Bank grow without making the same mistakes as in East Jefferson.

In a departure from most other newcomers, Matthew said he favors maintaining the discretionary funds that district representatives can dole out as they please.

"They pay for services and projects to districts," Matthew said.

Monique Roy-Cooper and Ted Ladner are also running.

2nd District

Candidates in the 2nd District were on the same page on most issues, offering few details to differentiate themselves.

River Ridge civic activist Howard Bennett said he supports vigorous enforcement of current ordinances, some of which he helped craft.

"Good people are leaving, (and) businesses are following them," he said. "Our children are leaving, but the criminals seem to be staying around."

Steve Theriot, a former state legislator, echoed his competitors, saying he would enforce the parish's new master plan to eliminate "hopscotch, hodgepodge zoning" and would push for quick completion of the Huey P. Long Bridge expansion project .

Elton Lagasse pointed to his experience running Jefferson Parish public schools as evidence of his ability to unite the parish. "One thing we need to do is pull this parish together," Lagasse said. "I have the ability to do that. I did that as superintendent."

Harahan City Councilman Vinny Mosca insisted said he would bring his experience as a defense attorney in "mediating the needs of others" to the council, fostering alliances among his colleagues to serve the needs of the whole parish.