

El Dorado Hills Telegraph

A Gold Country Media Online Edition

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Candidates line up for future city council seats

By: Raheem Hosseini, The Telegraph

To prepare for the possibility that El Dorado Hills could become a city, 18 candidates vying for five city council seats participated in candidates forums at the El Dorado Hills Community Services District Pavilion last week.

Most of the candidates cited their education and personal experience in their opening remarks, along with their priorities for the community.

Norm Rowett, a charter member of the El Dorado Hills Incorporation Task Force, stated his goal is to preserve the quality of life in the community, "which is deteriorating for lack of infrastructure."

Charel Winston cited her experience as a civil rights advocate, her "can-do philosophy," and her plans for an Internet auto mall as qualifications for her candidacy. "I believe this will keep our community like a bedroom community," Winston said of her pet Internet project.

Sunday Pearson, a former U.S. Army Corps of Engineers manager and sometime columnist for The Telegraph, took a more philosophical approach to her opening remarks, saying, "I am not a politician. I am a neighbor, a wife, a mother, a friend," adding that public safety was her "number one priority."

Larry Brilliant, a 21-year resident currently serving on the Community Services District board, the El Dorado Hills Chamber of Commerce, Friends of the Library and the Incorporation Committee, said it was his "deep commitment to the community's well being" that suited him for office.

Following the opening remarks, the candidates were asked their views on the controversial affordable housing issue that has concerned many residents.

"I don't really have a position on affordable housing," answered David Trapani, an attorney and member of the Community Services District board. Trapani said he believed in following the laws that are in place regarding housing requirements, but that cityhood would afford El Dorado Hills greater control over how those laws are enacted.

"From a mother's standpoint ... I want them," said Pearson, who said that young adults such as her daughter would not otherwise be able to afford housing in communities like El Dorado Hills. "We need that housing."

Brilliant pointed out that affordable housing requirements are regulated by agencies such as the Sacramento Area Council of Governments, but that a nascent city council would have to decide how it impacts the area's quality of life. "As your city council person, I'm not willing to just sit back and let that go," he said.

"It's something we need to deal with," offered Bob Hollis, president of the Springfield Meadows Community Services District and CEO of Carnegie Partners Inc., an executive search-consulting firm.

"Unfortunately, too many people associate affordable housing with an element we don't want here," he added, saying "just because you don't make \$300,000 to \$400,000 a year doesn't mean you don't have a place here."

Growth was another hot topic, with all the candidates agreeing that some form of growth would occur. The city only has five percent of developable lands left, with the bulk already earmarked for various bidders by the county.

"You do need some growth, but it's not really an issue in El Dorado Hills," said Rowett, who pointed to the 95 percent of available land that's been already earmarked by the county.

"My big issue is whether we're going to have responsible planning," said Brilliant. "We're going to have growth whether we're a city or not."

All candidates agreed that incorporation would yield the city greater control over how that growth would be handled.

When it came to questions about law enforcement, the candidates again agreed that improving response time would be a priority and that the city may need to form its own police department, as Citrus Heights recently did.

Highlighting the staffing shortage was the fact that Greg Murphy, an El Dorado County deputy sheriff running for city council, was unable to attend either of last week's forums.

The candidates were also asked how they could improve services and meet the increasing demands of a growing community without raising taxes, as all of them indicated they wouldn't do.

Brilliant said it would depend upon the city's ability to adhere to its budget and on the council aggressively seeking out alternative sources of funding, such as state and federal grants.

Hollis agreed, saying, "There is a lot of money out there that cities aren't collecting because they're not aware of these programs."

"We're the wealthiest community in El Dorado County," said Rowett, but without the current financial problems faced by the county, "so we're going to do well here financially."

While several of the candidates mentioned what they characterized as a conservative estimate of \$2.5 million in first-year revenues indicated in a June comprehensive fiscal analysis on the financial viability of incorporation, Lagomarsino cautioned, "A tax surplus of \$2.5 million isn't going to go very far." The city would have to build revenues by providing some shops and stores that people go to in Folsom, he said.

In answer to a question about how cityhood would be good for business, Lagomarsino added, "I'm not saying that we need an auto mall; it just helps to have an expensive one," prompting laughter from the audience.

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Candidates stress professional, political experience

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"With all the candidates that are running, everyone should be able to find five candidates to represent you on the city council," said Jeff Haberman, a local business owner who has sat on various community boards and committees, at last week's second candidate forum.

In an attempt to help voters narrow down their choices for city council should El Dorado Hills become a city, seven candidates participated in the second forum held at the Community Services District Pavilion.

Haberman, an El Dorado County Appeals board member, championed his ability to "work well with the county in our transition to city government" as one reason he should be considered.

He also pointed out why residents should be in favor of incorporation, saying, "Your problems are more likely to be our problems as well."

Howell Ellerman, an attorney and Folsom Lake College instructor, said it was his enthusiasm and "genuine love for this place" that led him to run for office. He wants to "reclaim the ethical high ground of what it means to be a public servant" and create a community "that's even more excellent than the one we know today."

Beau Palley, a local business owner, pointed out he is the sole financier of his campaign, saying he "(had) not accepted any campaign contributions of any kind. "I will always protect your tax dollars from being wasted," he explained.

One of the more intriguing candidates is Dorothy Nesbitt, the only candidate who has served on a city council. The former Pleasanton vice mayor called herself a "community activist ... (that was) dedicated to principles, not politics."

Justin Masters, currently vice president of the Community Services District board, outlined his goals to exercise land use control for traffic and create a local police force "all without raising taxes."

His wife supports his candidacy, he quipped, because "she knows I'd attend the meetings, anyway."

John Hidahl, a former Aerojet engineer, cited his extensive involvement with the incorporation effort during his opening remarks. "My involvement with this community is a very proven event," he said.

The forum followed the format of the previous night, with the candidates' opening comments followed by a series of questions submitted by the audience.

The first question centered on the ubiquitous traffic problem that El Dorado Hills residents are facing.

"Your city council doesn't pretend to be traffic engineers," said Ellerman. "We need to have good traffic engineers take our interests into account."

Nesbitt agreed with Haberman, who suggested solutions as simple as timing the lights to reduce traffic congestion.

El Dorado County Planning Commissioner John Knight supported the formation of a public works commission that would make traffic concerns a priority, while Hidahl said the city "really needs to look at parallel routes to Highway 50."

In discussing the affect incorporation would have on the El Dorado County Sheriff's presence in El Dorado Hills, most candidates cited the comprehensive fiscal analysis findings they said provided funds for more sheriff's deputies.

But Knight said police services were the one thing in the CFA "that I have serious issues with." The city would have to allocate more money in order to provide the same level of service the community currently receives, he said.

"The expectation from the city council, I hope, would be to improve those standards," added Hidahl, who agreed with all the candidates that current response times are inadequate.

Asked how the candidates would increase city revenues and enhance services, Palley responded, "By making El Dorado Hills as business friendly as possible," which he said included putting in place regulations and ordinances that were easy to understand.

Nesbitt favored taking advantage of economic development funds the state makes available to use as incentives. "It really becomes a war," she said to see which competing cities can attract businesses.

Both Hidahl and Haberman cited the findings of the CFA, which they said underpredicted first year revenues and shows services would improve just by virtue of incorporation.

When it came to parks and recreation, Masters said, "We're behind the eight ball on building parks."

The district is working on building three parks in three years, he said, but incorporation would "get that local land use control" that would allow the city to negotiate directly with developers.

Hidahl said the biggest challenge was finding flat land, which isn't as costly for developers to build on. "Ultimately, you need to have bigger sources of revenue."

Both Knight and small business consultant Susan Johnson admitted they had little experience with parks, with Johnson adding, "It's something I've heard the people say over and over again they need more of."

Ellerman and Palley suggested the parks that El Dorado Hills currently has are both underdeveloped and underutilized.

A question about the time the candidates are prepared to devote to the city council allowed for some levity.

"It's anyone guess how many hours it will take," said Haberman, but he joked he would devote one hour more than everyone else.

"I'll see his hour and raise him five," quipped Palley.

"None of us are up here because of the big bucks involved," Ellerman said to laughter from the audience. "If that was the case, we'd all be signing up for jury duty."

"Before it gets out in the public, I have to be quite candid to you," deadpanned Knight. "I'm doing it for the money."

The county planning commissioner pointed out that his current monthly stipend is \$200, whereas an EDH council member would earn a whopping \$600.

One of the few questions not to be raised the previous night was one about the candidates' positions on unions.

Haberman said he had "a father who was a union man all his life," and that he had no problem with the district's workers' union. "People know what the people here work for. I think they probably need a stronger union than they have."

Nesbitt said it was important to "look at how you spend your dollars and take the best road you have," choosing "whoever comes up with the best contract that looks the best for the city."

"I come from a very non-union family," said Masters, and his experience negotiating with unions "has been

frustrating. ...I'll deal with it if I have to."

As for the future development of El Dorado Hills, with 95 percent of the available lands already entitled by the county, the candidates were asked what power the council would have to shape growth.

The candidates pointed out some loopholes in the entitlements, with Ellerman saying there was an eight-year window in which those entitlements have to be enacted or else they default.

Nesbitt added that it was her experience on the Pleasanton City Council that as construction dates got nearer, developers would often come back to renegotiate certain aspects of the contract, "and that's our chance."

"We can't do anything unless the developers want to make some changes," concurred Masters, although Hidahl said new environmental findings could also open the door to changes in the agreements.

Of the upcoming development projects negotiated by the county, however, Knight said, "some of them are very, very good."

Regarding that last five percent, Knight said it was important for the city to develop strong zoning codes. Johnson agreed, saying, "That is what you will always have control of as a city."

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