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19 vying for El Dorado Hills council

Conflict is kept to a minimum as candidates focus on getting voters to approve cityhood.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer

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Leaders of El Dorado Hills' incorporation campaign say that if the cityhood measure passes Nov. 8, it would be due largely to the high caliber of the candidates running for the community's first city council.

Greg Jones, an incorporation spokesman, said the pool of 19 candidates should dispel any concerns about whether local leadership can match that of the county.

"We can do very well for ourselves," he said.

In interviews and community forums, candidates have refrained from verbal jabs, stressing instead the overriding importance of cityhood and their leadership qualifications.

"It's more important that we become a city than any individual candidate (winning)," said Constance "Connie" Wyatt. A candidate and founding member of the El Dorado Hills Incorporation Committee, Wyatt serves on the El Dorado Hills Community Services District board.

The opportunity to build a new city government has attracted candidates eager to work on behalf of this community of approximately 30,000 people. The top five vote-getters would be seated if Measure P, calling for incorporation, passes.

Council hopefuls include attorneys, educators, engineers, business managers, an economic development specialist and several entrepreneurs. Nearly half have held elected office locally or in other communities.

Joining Wyatt in the race are fellow community services district directors Larry Brilliant, a safety and risk-management consultant; David Trapani, an attorney; and Justin Masters, who is self-employed in online business marketing.

Incorporation leaders John Hidahl and Norm Rowett also seek council seats. As chairman and vice chairman, respectively, of the El Dorado Hills Incorporation Committee, they shepherded the cityhood measure to the ballot and are running as a slate.

"It's essential we move forward now. There won't be another chance like this," Hidahl said, adding that the costs associated with the incorporation process could preclude another effort.

Hidahl, an engineer with Northrop Grumman, has served on the El Dorado Hills Fire Department board for 22 years. Rowett, a retired Aerojet engineer, was a member of the El Dorado Hills Community Services District board that oversaw development of the 40-acre community park in the late 1980s.

During recent forums, candidates directed their criticisms toward county government, while engaging in some lighthearted jousting.

John R. Knight, a commercial real estate broker, member of the county Planning Commission and a volunteer firefighter, urged people to vote for him, "the candidate with no signs."

Beau Palley, who recently sold his multimillion-dollar company Orion Outdoor Media, countered by asking voters to choose him, "the candidate with the most signs." Palley estimates he is spending four times as much on the campaign as most of his competitors but boasts that he's using his own money.

Palley said he would make customer service a priority for city government.

The race has drawn three lawyers: C. Howell Ellerman, a professor at American River College and former vice chancellor of the Los Rios Community College District; Wyatt, who specializes in family law; and Trapani, who handles real estate, construction and business cases.

Ellerman was a Glendale city planner early in his career, and Trapani was one of two trial lawyers in El Dorado Hills' "yellow house" case.

Trapani represented homeowners who ran afoul of the El Dorado Hills Community Services District's design review committee when they repainted their house a color that the panel maintained violated the neighborhood's covenants, conditions and restrictions. The homeowners won.

Candidate Greg Murphy is an El Dorado County sheriff's deputy. Due to a staffing shortage in the department, Murphy was on duty and unable to participate in a pair of candidates' nights, organizers reported.

Improvements in law enforcement could begin as simply as providing El Dorado Hills residents with a local contact number for the Sheriff's Department, Murphy said in an interview.

Charel Winston, semiretired from a career in automotive and Internet-related businesses, owns a five-acre ranch in one of El Dorado Hills' more rural neighborhoods.

A primary advantage of cityhood, she said, would be having law enforcement officers assigned specifically to the community.

Winston, who describes herself as a civil rights advocate, has had run-ins with the legal system.

She and her domestic partner were indicted by the El Dorado County grand jury in August. The charges against the women include brandishing weapons and conspiring to commit theft by hiring people to perform work or supply products and then firing them without paying for the goods or services.

Winston denies the charges and maintains that the indictment was politically motivated. Winston said it has fueled her desire to see El Dorado Hills achieve local control through incorporation.

Bruce Lagomarsino, a government and history teacher at Mira Loma High School, has served on the Rescue Union School District board for 15 years.

"I stress the importance of local government in my courses," he said. "I'm a great believer in home rule."

Bob Hollis said he studied the pros and cons before declaring his support for incorporation. President of the Springfield Meadows Community Services District, serving neighborhoods south of Highway 50, Hollis said his constituents would give up local control because the district would dissolve if incorporation occurred.

Hollis said he would promote policies and practices that don't pit one part of the community against another.

Consensus and cooperation are keys to success not only within the community, but in dealing with the county, said Jeff Haberman.

A building designer and El Dorado County's 1992 Small Businessman of the Year, Haberman stresses the importance of working cooperatively with county government in the transition to cityhood.

Dorothy Nesbitt said incorporation also would give El Dorado Hills an opportunity to work with state

and regional agencies to improve services.

A retired community and economic development specialist, she served on the Pleasanton City Council in the early 1990s.

Reducing traffic congestion is a top priority.

As a city, Nesbitt said, El Dorado Hills would have "a place at the table" in determining the design of freeway interchanges and handling regional transportation problems that affect the community.

Sunday L. Pearson said she believes her experience with a federal agency would serve her well as a council member.

Pearson said she plans to retire in March after 30 years with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, where she oversees a \$650 million real estate program.

Susan M. Johnson, a small-business consultant, stresses her experience in the private sector. She retired from a 33-year career with the Bank of America, the last 12 as a branch manager in Silicon Valley.

Though vying for leadership positions, the candidates offered similar visions for their community.

Johnson summed it up, saying she looks forward to "a well-balanced city that is economically sound and attractive to new families and businesses alike - one that is clean and safe, with strong infrastructure."

Gerry Tryhane, a former Sacramento Bee executive turned business professor, said he filed for the race at the urging of friends, not expecting so much competition.

Given the field of well-qualified contenders, Tryhane said, he decided not to actively seek a seat, though his name remains on the ballot.

Candidate Bart Cox did not participate in candidates' forums sponsored by the League of Women Voters, nor did he respond to phone calls and e-mails requesting an interview.

A caller left a phone message stating that Cox was not giving interviews.

Measure P

El Dorado Hills incorporation

The proposal: A "yes" vote would create a new city of El Dorado Hills, having 17,839 acres, an estimated 18,000 registered voters and a total assessed value of \$3.9 billion. If incorporation passes, the El Dorado Hills and Springfield Meadows community services districts would be dissolved and their functions assumed by the new city.

Arguments in favor: Proponents say cityhood would keep tax dollars in El Dorado Hills to fund improvements in local services. Local government would be more accessible and accountable to residents, and cityhood would provide local control over growth.

Arguments against: Opponents question the fiscal viability of the city and predict residents would pay more in taxes and fees to support services. Because 95 percent of land inside the proposed boundaries has been developed or is under county-approved development agreements, residents would gain little control over growth.

Measure Q

El Dorado Hills council members

The proposal: Should future council members be elected at large or by district?

Arguments for at-large elections: Ensures that city council members act in the best interest of

the entire community, not special interests.

Arguments for district elections: None submitted.

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