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Candidates flesh out platforms in upcoming bid for City Council

Paola Baker, Victorville Daily Press

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Barstow's City Councilman Merrill Gracey answers a question during a candidate forum at Barstow (CA) City Hall on Tuesday October 9, 2018. [James Quigg, Daily Press]

BARSTOW — With weeks until the midterm elections, the six candidates running for City Council made their cases to voters in a candidates forum Tuesday evening.

Hosted by the Daily Press at City Hall chambers, the candidates answered questions on various issues affecting the city's present and future, such as homelessness, public safety, and the city's budget.

This will be the first election since the city switched to district-based elections earlier this year, carving up the city into four separate districts represented by one member of the Council each. Districts 1 and 2 are the two up for election.

Yet all six candidates, including incumbents Timothy Silva and Merrill Gracey, seemed to eschew this distinction. When asked what they could do for their particular district, each stressed they would continue to represent the city as a whole.

"We do what's best for Barstow, not 'my district' or 'my street' or 'my neighborhood'", Silva said.

District 2 candidate James Noble, who currently sits on the city's Planning Commission, said it was more important to foster further connections within the city, starting with nearby military bases Fort Irwin and the Marine Corps Logistics Base (MCLB).

"One of the things I like here is it's a small, tight-knit community that wants to thrive," Noble said. "I'd like to build a more cohesive team for this community. There's been a lot of negativity lately, and we have to connect with each other more."

Candidate Brianna Martinez, also running in District 2, said she was already working on making improvements within their district, starting with the "sewage smell" on Riverside Drive.

"I didn't wait to be elected to do something," Martinez said, a sentiment she would later echo when the candidates fielded a question on homelessness in the city.

Martinez, who said homelessness was a cause "near and dear to my heart," shared an anecdote about offering rides to a woman she would see walking down her street, using it as a segway into her ideas on how to best deal with the issue.

“The next time I saw her, she had her own car and had housing,” Martinez said. “It warmed my heart because she was willing to listen and get the help she needed.”

Martinez suggested expanding housing and transitional programs for the homeless to ensure they would have the tools necessary to become productive citizens, or “learn to re-think,” as she put it.

“If elected, and even if I’m not elected, that’s something I’m going to keep working on,” Martinez said.

Several of the candidates said there must be a distinction between the transient population that chooses that lifestyle over those that, as District 2 candidate Bennie Fedrick said, “have situations that make them become homeless.”

“That’s when we as a community have to wrap our arms around these people and do what we can to lift them up,” Fedrick said.

While he praised the “many organizations here” that offer help, Fedrick also warned that it was important to demand accountability. He would later repeat the point when answering questions on the city’s budget, in particular its declining reserves.

“We have to look into our payroll because our payroll is high. It’s the majority of our general fund,” Fedrick said. “We have to really look into that and see if maybe we are duplicating duties or overpaying for specific positions.”

Martinez and Noble both said they wanted to look for ways to attract bigger businesses to the area. Noble mentioned the idea of a casino in the area, noting the many benefits it could bring.

“It would bring jobs and opportunities for people to build homes here and stay here,” Noble said. “With that revenue, we could build our funds up and use them for something constructive here.”

Yet Gracey sought to assure voters that the city was in better financial shape than what’s widely believed, stating the city “was not destitute, as many believe,” while Silva argued that much of the declining trend should be attributed instead to stagnant revenues and major infrastructure investments.

“There’s basically two things you can do: tighten the budget and increase reserves,” Silva said. “The former has already started. And the revenues, they will come. It was a long, drawn out recession, but those revenues are finally starting to go up.”

District 1 David Mendez talked about the importance of truly getting businesses and citizens to “invest in the community,” starting with Measure Q, the one-percent sales tax measure on the ballot this fall.

Mendez, who supports the measure and was endorsed by the Barstow Professional Firefighters Association, compared the costs of the measure to the potential costs the community could pay if the city’s fire district is annexed to the **San Bernardino County Fire Department**.

“It’s in writing, regardless of what some people believe,” Mendez said. “An \$157 tax per parcel, with a three-percent increase every year. That is what’s going to happen. The only way to stop it is by passing this measure.”

The battle to keep police and fire services local has been raging inside the community since the failure of last year's Measure J, a special tax. All candidates, except for Martinez, have previously expressed their support of it.

Yet Fedrick has also been vocal about his reluctance to fully support the measure — and in extension, the current council. He seemed to make an about-face at the forum, stating he “would have to say no, if you ask me to vote today,” while again expressing his doubts about current leadership.

Fedrick also deviated from many of the rest when asked about the city's previous opposition to the state's “sanctuary state” bill. While Gracey, Silva, and Noble all said they would continue to oppose the bill, Fedrick unequivocally stated the opposite.

“I am the husband of a DREAMer. I know what that struggle is like and nobody around this particular circle does,” Fedrick said. “I am for sanctuary cities and I always will be.”

At the end of the forum, all candidates made it clear that no matter what happened in November, they would all strive to continue their goals in improving the community.

“I've got one platform and one platform only: to bring 100 percent change and transparency,” Mendez said. “I've spent my entire life in Barstow. If people want change, Nov. 6 is the time to do it.”

Visit our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/vvdailypress to watch the entire forum.

<http://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20181011/candidates-flesh-out-platforms-in-upcoming-bid-for-city-council>

FP-5 fire ‘fee’ a San Bernardino County Fire Department sham

Tom Pinard, Victorville Daily Press

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I begin this important urging of our fellow property owners across what has to be identified as the Mojave River Valley (MRV) Region, including for the sake of easy verbal identification, the two community college districts that cover it, the Barstow and the Victor Valley districts, so that we are all on the same page. As the President of the effort to make a Mojave County out of this area (and more) in 1988, to bring local and closer representation by the people to their government, I am caught up in a 30-year-later effort by San Bernardino interests to dictate and control our taxpaying property owners.

Here we are in 2018, with a scheme from San Bernardino interests, this time under the sham of the **San Bernardino County Fire Department**, conniving to obtain a “fee” from most of our individual property owners of \$157 per parcel per year with a 3 percent increase each year. A 3-2 vote by the Board of Supervisors, the governing board of the County Fire Department, authorized this scheme. Our Supervisor, Robert Lovingood, was a vote against the proposal and continues his stand against the effort. He has actively sought out those who will get the message out to individual property owners, even with the official information and ability to fight against us that has roadblocks built in making it almost impossible for the county’s scheme to fail.

By now, every affected property owner has received their notice from the county, with many, I’m sure, throwing it away as another notice or even junk mail. We know, those of us who have opened the letters, that no reply was provided, no election by the County Registrar of Voters was sent, only a notice about expanding the boundaries of FP-5.

One of my neighbors, in the mountain area of the Mojave River Valley region, years ago obtained the seven small lots around his home to equal about one normal lot. He received seven notices from the county and will be faced with over \$800 in new yearly taxes if this scheme is allowed to go forward. Obviously, across the region, there are similar stories, all because the San Bernardino County bureaucrats believe they can get away with whatever they need to grow their budgets, increase their wages, their retirements, bloat their staffs.

In public meetings that the County Fire Department held to explain their proposals, a score of neatly uniformed fire officials were in the room to answer questions. At no time during their presentations did the officials ever mention how much those officials in the room collectively were paid each year by county property owners, how much retirement these county officials would be receiving when they retired 10 to 15 years before the normal tax-paying citizen they sought to suck dry with their new yearly fee.

While our local fire departments have become unwieldy government, and union, cash cows, they have not really advanced their service from when in a simpler time firemen left their station and worked to put out a fire. The normal house fire is still an effort to save the foundation, with a rare example showing up from time to time that the firemen arrive in time to “save” the structure. Local community fire departments, tasked with providing fire fighting service, can do no more than respond and do what they can.

For what they do they should be paid nothing more, nothing less than a construction worker in the private sector. We have, through a campaign by their unions, idolizing media, made firefighters into something more. It is a good, honest occupation, no more or less, than a good plumber, electrician, or school teacher.

A good part of the \$157 per year, per parcel, wants to go for more salary costs for the bloated salaries of our County Fire Department, from bureaucrats down to the firefighter, and it has to be contained, stopped. There

is no question that any of our firefighters should be paid a wage reflecting of what they do. They are workers, doing honorable work, just as so many in the private sector in the myriad of jobs in America. They should work, save, and have the same shake as the oil rig worker I spent a few minutes with last week. Happy to have a job, paying his bills, saving for a retirement someday.

In the many conversations we have had since this FP-5 debacle has surfaced, many have regretted the idea of a County Fire Department, losing the local control individual communities used to have, and to a degree, controlling labor costs. An example one was mentioned, would be continuing an on-call firefighter situation that would have a minimal full-time staff with part-time firefighters on call to respond to a fire as needed. This method of operating a fire department still exists in many areas of the nation as communities afford the fire-fighting service they can afford.

Obviously, this would not work in larger communities but in those communities, a larger tax base (commercial/industrial) would allow for more full-time staffing. But local control in those communities could also keep wages/overhead costs in line with the wages paid for private sector workers.

Harkening back to my Mojave County days I am reminded that local fire chiefs across the Mojave County area were in agreement that a new county would allow an interesting “cooperative” effort by the individual community departments where a county agency could be developed that would have allowed for equipment, maintenance and support services that would back up the local departments. We were jazzed by this conservative approach and were looking forward to seeing it happen had the county been formed.

The many letters in the Daily Press have spelled out how many in the MRV region (larger than local historians have wanted to identify the area) feel. The scam, “If less than 25 percent of property owners respond, FP-5 is expanded and the tax is imposed. If more than 25 percent of property owners respond, but the combined value of property owners is less than 25 percent of the assessed value of all unincorporated property, the fires prevention district is expanded and the tax is imposed (from the Red Brennan Group),” is so slick, so much reflective of the Washington/Sacramento “swamp.”

We have to pray, at this point, that enough people get their forms printed out (how about all those without computers), sent in, and then actually tabulated by the same County Fire Department that wants the tax (talk about fox guarding the hen house). We are not holding our breath but we hope that this episode, if nothing else, will renew local interest in a more vigilant watch of governments, especially those that we may be able to control.

Obviously, we can't control even our local county government. But that still does not mean we have to throw in the towel. The MRV region has over 400,000 folks now and a good share of them are responsible, thinking folks, and most are property owners. There needs to be more effort to unite these folks against schemes like this, along with so many other efforts to uplift the area and at last, make it worthy for a Trader Joe's.

<http://www.vvdailypress.com/news/20181012/fp-5-fire-fee-san-bernardino-county-fire-department-sham>