

# The Times-Picayune

## Mayor's race draws three rivals

### Westwego's water among the hot topics

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Westwego residents will choose among two familiar faces and one new one in the city's upcoming mayoral election, but all of the candidates promise to improve the performance of city government.

Mayor John "Johnny" Shaddinger Jr., Councilwoman Lisa Valence and Westwego businessman Stephen "Stevie Ray" Brightbill are vying to become the city's first new full-term mayor in two decades. Shaddinger and Valence faced off in the city's special election in October, while Brightbill is a newcomer to politics.

Key issues facing Westwego are the fate of the city's dilapidated wastewater treatment and potable water plants, which have been running at a deficit for years; the construction of a new City Hall complex; and growing deficits in the city's general fund. Westwego, which is about one square mile, has about 10,500 residents.

--- John Shaddinger ---

Shaddinger has been mayor since January, and he said his short tenure has allowed residents to get a great idea of the kind of mayor he would be. He won the special election last year to serve out the term of longtime mayor Robert Billiot, who was elected to the state House of Representatives.

Shaddinger said he has met with several state and federal politicians to discuss the city's needs. He said he has made trips to Baton Rouge and Washington, D.C., to try to get money for local capital improvement projects.

"My re-election as mayor should be contingent on my performance as mayor," Shaddinger said. "My campaign has been kind of secondary."

The mayor said he has worked to reduce operating costs in the city, which allowed his administration to absorb this year's increase in the health insurance premiums for city employees. He said he will always look to manage the city more efficiently before he asks the voters for money, and he said he plans to step up efforts to secure outside grants for projects.

Shaddinger said that with the help of state officials, he recently finalized plans to build a water tower in the city that will require Westwego to spend only \$265,000 of its own money. He promised to be an aggressive advocate and ambassador for the city's residents.

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--- Lisa Valence ---

Valence, a former elementary school principal, pointed to her administrative experience as proof that she can manage the egos and competing concerns of the council. She said her close loss in the special election showed that residents were receptive to her message, and she believes she is best qualified to lead the city through potentially turbulent times.

"I just believe I can serve the city best in the role of mayor," said Valence, who acknowledged that she and Shaddinger share many opinions on the best course for the city. "We have a lot of common ground on where we want to move the city, but we haven't been moving. . . . I think if we don't move forward, we lose the water plant. The federal agencies aren't going to let us drag our feet."

Valence said she wants to see Westwego maintain the independence of its two plants, but she said city officials have to be more aggressive about seeking federal and private grants to renovate them. She also pledged to let residents pay their bills electronically and to work on improving technology in the city.

One of her first efforts would be to meet with each council member and outline her plans for the city and then get an idea of their goals, she said. She also said she will consider hiring a grant writer to help the city secure outside financing. Finally, Valence has long advocated for city departments developing five- or 10-year budgets that account for capital expenditures and other long-term costs.

--- Stephen Brightbill ---

Brightbill, the part-owner of a racetrack near Donaldsonville and a bar in Westwego, said it's obvious that the city officials who have been in power don't know how to fix Westwego's problems, and he thinks he does.

Brightbill worked in the city's maintenance office for 20 years, and he said he knows the inner workings of the city's water and sewer plants, which he said should be a prerequisite for any mayoral candidate.

"This city needs some changes, and nobody is going out and seeking anything," said Brightbill, who promised to run the city more like a business. The city "is just broken down like an old car that nobody ever repaired."

Brightbill said the city needs to create tax credits to encourage economic development, and it needs to concentrate on enforcing its zoning and other laws equitably. He said too often city officials have allowed favoritism to influence which businesses are allowed to open. He added that the city should consider using city workers to do more of its maintenance projects instead of hiring outside contractors.