

The Times-Picayune

Candidates largely agree on city's needs

Westwego voters will pick mayor, council

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Despite several new faces in Westwego's mayoral and council races, many of the candidates shared the same solutions for the city's lingering problems when they spoke at a forum Thursday night.

A total of 20 candidates have qualified for Westwego's April 4 election and most attended the Alliance for Good Government's candidate forum to discuss their ideas on how the city of 11,000 residents should be run. Westwego residents will elect five council members and a mayor.

Candidates who attended the forum were given time to introduce themselves and were asked a series of questions drafted by the Alliance. By the end of the night it was clear that there was a consensus among the candidates on most issues.

The candidates were asked how they would fix deficits in Westwego's general fund, how they would eliminate subsidies to the city's water and wastewater plants and what concrete plans they have for jump-starting economic development. They also were polled on their positions on term limits, home rule charters and whether Westwego employees who hold managerial positions should be required to have high school diplomas.

Incumbent Mayor Johnny Shaddinger and his challenger, Councilwoman Lisa Valence, promised that their main concern will be serving the community. They agreed the city should maintain the independence of its wastewater and water plants, and vowed to seek federal or state grants to repair the facilities.

Shaddinger said he plans to focus on economic development if re-elected, because he thinks that spurring the city's economy will ultimately eliminate the general fund deficit. However, he stressed that his real job is maintaining a rapport with the city's residents.

"I have the vision and an understanding of the needs of the community," Shaddinger said.

Valence said she has a track record of involvement in the lives of Westwego's residents and ticked off a lengthy list of volunteer organizations with which she's been involved. She said she believes that Westwego can reach its potential if the city learns to embrace technology and the benefits it can bring to residents. She said she plans to institute electronic bill paying and other services.

"I have a great passion for the city," Valence said.

In the 1st District council race, both Glenn Green and Dan Alario said they also have a passion to serve the city's residents.

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Green, who previously served 12 years on the council, said he feels that being a servant of the people is his calling. He pledged to create tax breaks to lure businesses to the city, and improve the city's water delivery system.

Alario, former mayor of Westwego, said he's lived in the city his entire life, and is intimately aware of what the community needs to thrive. He promised to push to get the new City Hall built, and said that to maintain his independence, he would take no campaign contributions.

In the 2nd District race, incumbent Ted Munch was the only candidate to attend the forum. Munch promised to use his three decades of experience to steer the city in the right direction.

"I certainly enjoy what I do. I have a good understanding of the city," he said.

Former Councilman Ivy Rogers and newcomer Norman Fonseca are the candidates in the 3rd District race, and the two men agreed on most issues, with the only point of division being term limits. Rogers, who previously served 12 years on the council, said officials should be limited to three terms, while Fonseca, in arguing against term limits, echoed several other candidates in noting that ultimately the voters have the power to decide whether they like the job someone is doing.

Four candidates qualified for the 4th District race, but only Councilman Melvin Guidry and Westwego building inspector Les Lombas attended the forum.

Guidry touted his 23 years of serving residents and his track record of getting projects completed in the city, including recent improvements to the city's parks. However, Lombas argued that it's time for new blood on the council because the city needs a new vision if it wants to improve.

In the 5th District, incumbent Larry Warino and newcomer Wayne Tullier both supported requiring potential managers in Westwego to have high school diplomas because of the increasing use of technology in today's society. Warino said he feels that his first term on the council gave him a wealth of experience in handling disasters and in understanding how city government works. He says he can use that to develop solutions to the city's problems.

Tullier said it's obvious that Westwego has a serious infrastructure problem, particularly with its streets, and he said the current officials have not done a good job of addressing those problems. He added that it will be impossible to attract high-quality businesses if the city doesn't improve the services it provides.

"The world is leaving Westwego behind," Tullier said.