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Candidates state their case

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Friday, October 7, 2005 6:12 PM EDT

For anyone who enjoys knockdown, drag-out political bickering, the Apex town board candidates' forum would have been a big disappointment.

Incumbents Mike Jones and Gene Schulze and challengers Bill Sutton and Ann Lassiter agreed on most issues during the Sept. 29 event at town hall. They also politely disagreed on a few others.

The four candidates are vying for three open seats on the board. Commissioner Doug Meckes chose not to seek reelection.

Jones, an Apex native, has served on the board since 1989 while Schulze is seeking his second term.

Sutton has never run for public office before but was town manager in Apex from 1993-2001.

Lassiter, who has lived in town for 30 years, has no political experience but has worked in various capacities in the General Assembly for the past 18 years.

In what has become seemingly mandatory in Apex politics, all four vowed to maintain the "charm," "feel" or "atmosphere" of the rapidly growing "small town."

In answering the nearly 25 questions submitted from the public, the candidates were in agreement on the importance of improving roads and sidewalks, keeping taxes low, and denouncing forced annexation.

The candidates also agreed that the town should put more pressure on the Wake County Public School System over topics that concern Apex residents, such as mandatory year-round schools.

Differences in political philosophy did arise over some of the more controversial topics.

In discussing the Seagroves development on Center Street, both Sutton and Lassiter criticized the decision to allow developer Mike Whitehead to build on land the town initially wanted to use as a large park.

Sutton, who is a member of the planning board, noted that he voted against the

development twice.

"It didn't meet the spirit or the letter of the land use plan," said Sutton. "(Center Street) is already overcrowded."

Lassiter said she would have voted against it, too, had she been on the board. But she added the development "will be a good community."

But Jones and Schulze defended their decision to vote for the development. Jones pointed out the town never had the opportunity to purchase the land because it was never publicly up for sale.

In discussing the proposed sewage plant in New Hill, all four candidates agreed that it was not the best site for the facility.

Sutton said he would have supported a resolution proposed by Commissioner Bill Jensen that supported further site studies. That resolution failed when the other commissioners chose not to support it.

"I wouldn't want (the sewage plant) in my neighborhood," said Sutton. "The (resolution) died for lack of support."

Lassiter said building the plant in New Hill was "not a wise decision" and said she would support further study on it. She added, however, that voting for the resolution "would not have done any good."

Jones said other sites should have been considered and Schulze said New Hill residents should have been given more input into the process.

The four candidates were in total agreement over what might be the hottest political topic in Apex in the possible closure of two railroad crossings in the downtown.

Jones said the board has been discussing different options for more than two years and that he would be "happy to look at different alternatives."

Schulze agreed, saying the board needed to do a "lot more thinking" before making a decision.

"I'm extremely reluctant to close any crossings," said Schulze. "Before that ever happened I would want to know the type of impact that would have on the downtown."

Both Sutton and Lassiter also voiced their opposition to closing any crossings.

Lassiter delivered the most pointed jab of the evening while answering a question about growth.

She noted that much of the development in town "occurred under Mr. Sutton's direction" when he was town manager.

"I wasn't on the town board then, some other people were," said Lassiter. "Apex needs to be careful of the direction it will go."

But Lassiter struggled with questions concerning building codes and the traffic plan for

Center Street, admitting she didn't "know as much as she should" about the topics.

In their closing remarks, Schulze said he was "extremely optimistic" about the future of Apex.

"I ran on a platform of quality growth and I'm happy to say I contributed to the quality growth that has occurred," said Schulze. "It occurred because of good planning."

He also said the needs of neighborhoods and businesses have been balanced.

Jones said he felt privileged to serve on the board for 16 years and said he was committed to a fiscally responsible government.

He said parks and recreation are "very important" to Apex residents and that he would continue to work at acquiring more land for parks and open space.

Lassiter admitted she didn't have much experience but said she was committed to the town she loves.

"I don't have great qualifications but I have a devotion to my town," said Lassiter. "I'm very familiar with how government works, having worked for DOT and the state for 28 years.

"People have pride in Apex and I plan on working hard for this town."

Noting that he believed in being proactive, Sutton said the town needed to acquire more land for parks and should take control of several state roads in town so repairs and improvements could be made quickly.

"We need to take charge of our town," said Sutton. "Don't let a developer tell us what our town will look like.

"I've always been a fiscal conservative. The government exists to help people. Local government exists to help ensure quality of life."

The forum was co-sponsored by the Western Wake Democrats Club and the Western Wake Republicans Club. Representatives from the John Locke Foundation and the Wake County League of Women Voters served as moderators.