

Politics | updated: 1/27/2017 4:26 PM

Elgin candidates on taxes, downtown and more



Candidates for the Elgin City Council in the April 4 election took part in a forum organized by the Elgin Octave group Thursday night. They are, from left, Carol Rauschenberger, Brandon Yaniz, John Prigge, Brenda Rodgers, Terry Gavin, Corey Dixon and Rich Dunne.

Elena Ferrarin | Staff Photographer



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Elgin City Council candidates aired their views on several topics during an election forum Thursday night.

Incumbents John Prigge, Carol Rauschenberger, Terry Gavin and Rich Dunne, along with former councilwoman Brenda Rodgers, Planning and Zoning Commissioner Corey Dixon, and Brandon Yaniz are vying for four 4-year terms April 4.

Yaniz, owner of a business consulting company, said he will work "tirelessly" to make Elgin a destination for small businesses. Rodgers, who works in real estate, said she's passionate about housing and economic development. Dixon, a caseworker for the department of human services, said the city should focus on homelessness and guarding taxpayer dollars.

The forum, organized by the fiscally conservative group Elgin Octave, was at Solid Rock Free Will Baptist Church.

Rodgers, Dunne and Rauschenberger said they favor the "rain tax" -- a stormwater utility fee the city considered in 2014 -- while Prigge, Gavin and Yaniz do not. Dixon said he needs more information.

State budget

The candidates have different views on a state budget proposed by Senate President John Cullerton and Senate Minority Leader Christine Radogno that would freeze local property taxes.

Dixon said that would help seniors on fixed incomes, and Dunne and Gavin said the bill would raise income taxes. Elgin is among the state's growing communities, and with that comes additional costs covered by property taxes. That's why keeping existing businesses is crucial, Rodgers said.

Yaniz said a property tax freeze would force Elgin to find innovative sources of revenue. Rauschenberger said the city could increase taxes on electricity or phone services. Prigge, who's criticized the city's property tax increase the last two years, said the city would have to look at cuts and service reductions "that taxpayers can absorb."

Elgin Area Chamber

Some candidates said the Elgin Area Chamber of Commerce, which has a \$275,000 contract with the city for economic development services, is not serving the city well.

Rauschenberger said the chamber's economic development group is doing better than in the past but the city could consider a different model in the future. Dunne said he doesn't support hiring an economic development director for the city -- which Prigge advocates -- but he'd consider an outside contractor.

Dixon said chamber representatives speak at city council meetings only when it's time to renew their contract. "We need to have check-in points with them, see if they are accomplishing goals and tasks."

Gavin and Rodgers said the chamber is bringing in large businesses.

Help for nonprofits

It's important to ensure nonprofits remain viable so they can tackle homelessness and drug addiction, problems that are otherwise left to first responders, Gavin said.

Yaniz said it should be up to individuals, not the city, to support nonprofits. Prigge agreed, saying city funding decisions are "too political." Nonprofits need to find the money to fund themselves, Rodgers said, suggesting a food truck fundraiser.

Rauschenberger and Dixon said they support giving some public funds to nonprofits. "People are struggling, we shouldn't be talking about cutting," Dixon said.

What about downtown?

The city should focus on increasing density downtown to attract millennials and young businesses, Rauschenberger said. A good mix of residential and businesses is needed, Dunne said, but ensuring adequate parking is paramount.

Dixon said the city should change its downtown zoning "so we don't end up with nonprofits taking up retail space."

Prigge said the city should wait for the Tower Building -- scheduled to open in a few months -- to be fully occupied and see what ripple effects that might have.

Looking back, Dunne said, the city shouldn't have expanded on the far west side because growth didn't come as fast as anticipated, sticking the city with costs such as snowplowing.

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