

Elgin City Council candidates say voter turnout has affected election



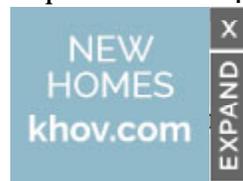
Seven candidates vying for four open seats on the Elgin City Council participated with the OCTAVE forum Thursday night. (Janelle Walker / The Courier-News)

By **Janelle Walker**
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About 75 residents attended a candidate forum hosted Thursday night by area activist group Elgin OCTAVE (Operant Conditioning To Achieve Voter Expectations).

Topics included questioning why fewer people are running for the council this year and specific candidates to each of their fellow panelists.



l elections are set for April 4. Four seats on the nine-member panel are open this

Elgin OCTAVE began as a community group surrounding Elgin's decision to require businesses licensing, said Chuck Keysor, one of the founders and current members. The group has about 15 people actively involved, he said following the forum.

Running for the council this year are incumbents Rich Dunne, Terry Gavin, John Prigge and Carol Rauschenberger facing challengers Corey Dixon, Brenda Rodgers and Brandon Yaniz.

Rodgers is a past council member, who last ran for reelection and lost in 2007 following a four-year term.

Forum moderator Bill Werst started out with what he called a softball question, wondering why fewer people were running for the council this year.

In 2015, 11 people ran for council seats. Mayor David Kaptain's seat was also up for election with one challenger.

In 2013, voters were asked to pick five seats out of 15 candidates.

All of the seven candidates this turn said they believed voter burnout following a contentious federal election cycle may be why fewer people are running for local office. Dunne, Dixon, Rodgers, Prigge, Yaniz and Rauschenberger said that was likely part of the reduced interest.

Others felt there are fewer issues — and no hot-button topics — in front of the council during this election cycle.

While noting voter apathy, Dunne believes "the city is going in a fairly decent direction." The city's current AAA bond rating, the highest bond rating achievable for municipalities is part of that, he added, saying "good moves (by the council) in general and bringing in retail on Randall (Road), commercial and industrial," is part of overall good positioning by the current board.

Gavin said that, like Dunne, he believed that as the city is heading in a positive direction, there were fewer issues to make people want to run for office.

 **EXPAND X** eved that a feeling of hopelessness has settled over voters. "People locally are in a
ist not motivated to get up and serve," he said.

on from Elgin OCTAVE asked what the candidate thought of a potential property tax freeze from the state.

Talking about freezing property taxes in a sate where there had not been an operating budget for 1 1/2 years means the city must watch how every dollar is spent, Dixon said.

"I plan to continue to watch how we spend every dollar and look at all options before raising taxes ... and watch out for our city's most vulnerable," he said. Dixon added he would consider increasing taxes if the money was for programs to support the middle class and senior citizens.

Bringing more companies into Elgin would offset a property tax freeze, Rodgers said. In her previous term, she said she worked to retain a big-box retailer that added 400 jobs to the community and that she would "make sure we have the money to continue and attract companies to assist us in that."

As a home-rule community, Elgin has more ability to diversify its revenue than smaller communities, Rauschenberger said.

"We can tax other services, electricity and phone, that is what the city did do — diversify how we tax and raise our funds. We don't have to put the whole burden on property taxes," she said.

Yaniz, who noted that his family had at one time operated stores in the city, said Elgin "has to get lean, get innovated, cut taxes and raise revenue. If we are forced into a tax freeze it forces us to go through how we spend money and get rid of what is extra and superfluous."

In this forum, the hosts gave each candidate the chance to ask one question to have each of the other candidates respond to.

Gavin asked about the "rain tax," a proposal during the 2015 election cycle which would have asked taxpayers to pay for stormwater projects — why incumbents voted as they did and what the challengers thought of the now-defunct plan.

Rodgers asked what life experiences prepared the candidates to serve on the council, and Prigge asked if the city should consider professionalizing economic development rather than contract with the Elgin Area Chamber of Commerce.

Yaniz asked if candidates were to play "Monday morning quarterback" which previous city decisions would they go back and change.

Rauschenberger asked what ideas candidates had for keeping downtown Elgin vital, and Dunne's whether the council should pass an ethic ordinance. Dixon asked about the current plan and possible changes to that plan.

Following the forum, Elgin OCTAVE asked each candidate to complete a survey. Those surveys and responses can be found on the organization's website, www.elginoctave.org.

The forum was taped and will be uploaded to the OCTAVE YouTube channel, Keysor said.

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