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## Candidates show voters why to choose them



(from left) Chetley Breeden, Matt Brooks, Berlon Weeks and Chris Cowart relax before the start of the speaking engagement on Thursday night (July 28) in Cedar Key. Cowart served as the moderator. It was first booked as a debate, but none of the incumbents showed up. The next debate, or gathering, is set for Thursday (Aug. 4) from 6 to 9 p.m. in the Tommy Usher Community Center in Chiefland. Jeff M. Hardison is scheduled to be the moderator that night.

**Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © July 30, 2016 @ 4:37 p.m.**

**LEVY COUNTY** -- Three of the six men seeking election to three seats on the Levy County Board of County Commissioners responded to questions Thursday night (July 28) to show voters why they should be selected to hold office.

Chetley Breeden (R-Dist. 3), Matt Brooks (R-Dist. 5) and Berlon Weeks (R-Dist. 1) were present at the event held on the second floor of the Cedar Key Public Library, 460 Second St.



Although they were all invited, the incumbents Mike Joyner (R-Dist. 3), Danny Stevens (R-Dist. 5) and John Meeks (Dist. 1) were absent. Meeks was said to be out of town, and Stevens and Joyner were said to have provided no reply to the invitation.

There was standing room only in the packed meeting room at the Cedar Key Public Library.

**Jerry Lawrence states the county has ranked low in the past years, and he questions why candidates for the position of Levy County Superintendent of Schools were excluded from consideration for a debate on health issues in Levy County.**

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Regional General Hospital (RGH) of Williston is hosting three events where candidates can address the public. The first was in Cedar Key and was moderated by Chris Cowart, a member of the Levy County School Board.

There are two more -- on Aug. 4 in Chiefland and Aug. 18 in Williston. Details about those next two planned events are at the bottom of this story.



First titled as "debates," the July 28 event in Cedar Key reflected no debate, but instead the candidates who were present found an opportunity to speak to the public.

The most recent event included a spontaneous offering for the two candidates in the race for Levy County Superintendent of Schools to speak, thanks to moderator Chris Cowart going "off script" a little bit.

## **Jeff Edison uses three minutes to tell about his civic affiliations and his family.**

Jeff Edison spent his three minutes listing civic organizations to which he belongs, and listing his immediate family members. Jerry Lawrence spent fewer minutes – most reciting the low placement of Levy County in test

rankings and questioning why the hospital did not provide a forum for people in the race for Levy County Superintendent of Schools.

When RGH started the set of three debates, it offered candidates in races for the Levy County Board of County Commissioners a chance to debate with each other about healthcare issues that relate to the residents and visitors of Levy County.

Every minute of the two-hour session was filled with talk. Cowart posed questions to the candidates, rotating who was to answer first. Since there was no strong stated difference of opinion between the three who showed up, there was no "debate," however all three spoke without the general smoke and mirrors of some national politicians.

Candidates noted their appreciation to RGH, the Town of Cedar Key and to Cowart for being the moderator. The questions were primarily provided by the hospital.

Following are some answers to questions by the three candidates under their names. After that there will be some questions stated, with their responses.

This will only be a representative sample of questions, because two hours of talking equals tens of thousands of words.

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## **CHETLEY BREEDEN**

Click [HERE](#) to see a link to a previously published story, where he announced his candidacy.

When asked what he would do to support



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local healthcare, said Breeden said this is a vital part of the county. He endorses sustaining it, with RGH being one example.

Breeden lives five minutes away from RGH, and he questions the logic of being an ambulance taking him to a hospital in Gainesville or Ocala that is at least 35 minutes away, when RGH can handle many emergency medical needs.

He mentioned that the travel time to Alachua and Marion counties is even more for a person driving from Cedar Key. Breeden said it is important for everyone to know the owners of the hospital have improved it to where it is a place to go now for medical help.

“It is a great hospital now,” Breeden said, adding that there is a need to raise public awareness of the healthcare available at RGH.

In regard to keeping ambulances in Levy County, Breeden said he agrees with Brooks and Weeks, who spoke about reviewing protocols and considering allowing Chiefland Fire Rescue’s paramedics to provide Advanced Life Support services as they wait for ambulances.

Beyond that, Breeden said, he wants to encourage the ambulance drivers to take patients to RGH and the emergency room that RGH is planning to open in Chiefland.



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## **MATT BROOKS**

Click [HERE](#) to see a link to a previously published story, where he announced his candidacy.

When asked what he would do to support local healthcare, Brooks said that as county leaders, commissioners must have a positive outlook on business interests in Levy County.

“We need to have a positive attitude,” he said, “and to provide an environment that promotes local healthcare.”

Brooks advises against Levy County officials creating a negative environment for local healthcare.

When people move to Levy County, he said, they understand the difficulties of aging and being farther away from a hospital. He worked in the medical industry before owning his own business.

As people understand that local healthcare at RGH is a worthwhile asset to be used, he sees traffic to the hospital will increase.

With the prospect of a hospital being built in Chiefland, Brooks said it will behoove the people of Levy County to continue to be open to that idea. Likewise, Brooks added, it will be wise for county leaders as they make plans for growth to remember the influx of an older generation coming into Levy County.

“We’ve got to plan for the future with EMS,” Books said. “We’ve got to be able to support transports and have great paramedics to serve our aging population.”

Brooks has ridden along with LCDPS paramedics, he said.

EMS all over Florida is seeing a staffing problem, Brooks said. In Levy County, he added, the paramedics must be the top, most qualified and trained. They sometimes are the only medical person to see a patient in that first hour.

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In a larger metropolitan area, paramedics reach a hospital much more quickly than those transporting patients in Levy County, Brooks said.

As he continued answering a question about keeping ambulances in Levy County, Brooks said the first thing to review is existing protocols. He would try to find methods to not have to take patients to Gainesville or Ocala.

The “zero status,” where there are no ambulances available in Levy County, is something that may become even worse if more paramedics are not hired, he said.

As it stands, paramedics are being forced to work overtime, he said. Even the most dedicated employee can become burnt out from that situation, Brooks added.



## ~ **BERLON WEEKS**

Click [HERE](#) to see a link to a previously published story, where he announced his candidacy.

When asked what he would do to support local health care, Weeks said that in 2010 the hospital was seeing 380 transports and last year that number dropped to 155.

The reduction in traffic to the RGH emergency room as a result of Levy County Department of Public Safety ambulances taking patients elsewhere, Weeks said, causes RGH to be more limited.

The hospital has been significantly improved with equipment, appearance and personnel, Weeks said.

The willingness of RGH to transfer 25 of the allotted beds to the future for emergency room service at the future facility in Chiefland, Weeks said, is a great thing. People who don't support the hospital, he said, are causing an asset to potentially be diminished in Levy County.

“What these guys are planning to do with an emergency room in Chiefland is a great thing,” Weeks said.

As far as keeping ambulances in Levy County, Weeks said he endorses looking again at the concept proposed by Chiefland Fire Rescue, where its paramedics could provide Advanced Life Support functions as they await an ambulance from Levy County Department of Public Safety.

In answering another question, speaking of LCDPS, Weeks said the county should have hired Williston Fire Chief Lamar Stegall.

Weeks also said that former LCDPS Director David Knowles tried to build a kingdom, and wasted money.

Weeks sees the “rubber stamp” by the current County Commission for Knowles' expenditure requests proved to be a mistake. This candidate said that perhaps the LCDPS needs to be revamped.

In the private business sector, Weeks said, the business owner sees when something is not working and he or she adjusts their practices in an effort to resolve problems.

Following are some of the many questions and answers.

## **MORE QUESTIONS**

\* How will the county handle the issue with Levy County not being represented on the board of medical directors for the Department of Public Safety?

This question reflects a view that the medical director for the department earns a living, other than as the director for the county, from a hospital located in Gainesville.

In the rotation of questions, this one fell on Breeden first.

He said he did not have enough information about the issue to answer.

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Brooks answered in a rather matter of fact manner. Brooks said the county would need to find a doctor who lives in Levy County who would be willing to serve as a medical director.

The candidate said one single County Commission member would not have the authority to initiate that change occurring, but it would take a majority of the board.

When he answered, Weeks said Brooks gave the best answer to the question.

“I would think that you would want to put your local hospital on the board (for medical directives) along with whatever other doctors are on there,” Weeks added. “So I would think you would want to give a seat to Williston Regional General Hospital.”

\* What type of business would you like to see locate or relocate to Levy County?

Weeks said he would like to see manufacturing of mobile homes, mattresses or auto parts, or something than can provide an employment opportunity for relatively good pay to manual laborers.

Breeden said the business models shown in Levy County that are good to follow are from A&N Corp., Monterrey Boats and Shadow Trailers.

Those companies do not make a large footprint on the land, but they provide jobs for many people, Breeden said.

Brooks recommends taking an inventory of county assets. He wants to see what resources are available for currently existing industries to possibly expand.

Brooks said he wants possible manufacturers to be vetted to help assure they would be good stewards of the county’s natural land and water resources. This candidate recommends looking at the airport and other areas of the county where industrial interests can build, too, rather than considering large tracts of currently pristine property for possible conversion for use by a manufacturer.

\* Do you disagree with any county purchase?

Brooks said the purchase of “battalion trucks” by the LCDPS was a mistake. The trucks are heavy and gas-guzzlers and are only used to transport supplies, he said.

Weeks said he concurs with Brooks in regard to that non-transport, non-firefighting truck purchase.

Weeks also believes the purchase of the state’s former women’s prison to build into an LCDPS training facility was a significant error as well. He would have housed the supplies for EMS in Bronson, too, rather than outside the city several miles.

Putting a resupply station in Bronson would have been more efficient, Weeks said, because many ambulances going to Gainesville use State Road 24 through Bronson.

The \$500,000 radio system for LCDPS that ended up costing \$1.5 million was another big waste of money, Weeks said.

Breeden said the money the county spent at the LCDPS training facility is a waste.

There are other methods for firefighters to be trained, Breeden said. He said there is a state fire college in Marion County.

Breeden agrees with Weeks and Brooks in regard to the new trucks being a big expense for simply transporting supplies.

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Among the people asking questions of their own of the candidates near the end of the meeting was Cedar Key Commissioner Sue Colson.

Rather than ask questions, she took the opportunity to share her opinion that Cedar Key has been ignored and neglected by “your county,” except for by County Commissioner Lilly Rooks, who is the only member of the Levy County Commission who understands the needs of the residents of and visitors to this city in Levy County, according to Colson.

Colson offered to give the candidates an “environmental tour” of the city. She told them that if they invite manufacturing to Levy County, then they must do whatever is needed to protect the water resources here, which is the best water in Florida, according to Colson.

She said the multimillion dollar clam industry in Cedar Key depends on the delicate balance

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of a proper environment, and any business that would hurt that balance should be sent to some other place to make its home.

The (Thursday) Aug. 4 debate, or gathering, is scheduled to be in the Tommy Usher Community Center, 506 S.W. Fourth Ave. (State Road 345), in Chiefland. It will be from 6 to 8 p.m. HardisonInk.com Publisher Jeff M. Hardison is scheduled to be the moderator.

The Aug. 18 debate, or gathering, is scheduled to be in the Pyper Kub Cafe and Restaurant, 1890 S.W. 18th St., in Williston. It will be from 6 to 8 p.m. Restaurant Owner David Bibby is scheduled to be the moderator.

These debates, or gatherings, are free and open to everyone to attend.