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Four candidates answer questions



Before the discussion began, Williston Mayor R. Gerald Hethcoat (standing at right) visits with the candidates (from left) Chetley Breeden, John Meeks, Matt Brooks and Berlon Weeks.

Story and Photos By Jeff M. Hardison © Aug. 19, 2016 @ 10:17 p.m.

WILLISTON -- Four of the six candidates for three seats on the Levy County Board of County Commissioners appeared for a discussion Thursday evening (Aug. 18) at the Pyper Kub Café and Restaurant in Williston.

Incumbent Levy County Commissioner John Meeks, a Republican seeking reelection to his seat in District 1; Berlon Weeks, a Republican seeking election to take the seat in District 1; Chetley Breeden, a Republican seeking election to take the seat in District 3; and Matt Brooks, a Republican seeking to take the seat in District 5 were present.

Incumbents Levy County Commissioner Mike Joyner, a Republican seeking reelection to his seat in District 3; and Danny Stevens, a Republican seeking reelection to his seat in District 5, were absent.

Joyner sent a note to thank the sponsors of the event and he noted his apology for not being able to attend due to a previously scheduled event.

Stevens has not been present at any of the three events sponsored by Regional General Hospital of Williston. He did not send any note, either, unlike Meeks, Joyner and Breeden, who were each unable to attend one of the three events.

Dave Bibby, who owns and operates the Pyper Kub Café with his wife Carol, served as moderator on Thursday night. Audience members were able to order food and drink during the event.

Bibby allowed Jerry Lawrence and Jeff Edison, candidates for Levy County Superintendent of Schools, to tell listeners why to vote for them before the event, which was slated for the County Commission candidates.

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Jerry Lawrence explains why people should vote for him.

JERRY LAWRENCE

Jerry Lawrence and his wife Kathy have been in Levy County for 12 years. They are both lifelong educators, and they taught here during that time.

For 13 years now, Lawrence said, Levy County has ranked in the bottom 50 percent of Florida's 67 counties.

"And when a team has a 13-year losing streak," Lawrence said, "it's not the team. It's the coaches. I firmly believe the time is upon us to change the leadership."

Lawrence said he believes the district has failed to give students the skills and knowledge they need, so that when they graduate, they are able to obtain a job. Of if they want to go to college, they don't have to take remedial classes to attend college.

His vision is for students in Levy County to be ranked in the top 50 percent at least, and preferably in the top 25 percent of counties.

Lawrence sees this goal as being possible to attain by working together, pulling together and putting children first.

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Jeff Edison shares why he thinks people should vote for him.

JEFF EDISON

Jeff Edison said he was in education for 30 years.

He served 11 years as a teacher, 10 years as a coach, and was an assistant principal for four years, a principal for four years, the director of administration for four years, the assistant superintendent of instruction for four years, and for the past four years as the assistant superintendent of administration.

Edison said he has served the community as a Rotary Club member, on the Nature Coast Economic Development Council, and is a past president of the former Kiwanis Club that existed in Levy County.

Then came the time for the County Commission candidates to speak.

Here are some of the questions Bibby asked, with the responses from the County Commission candidates:

*** The Levy County Board of County Commissioners is proposing to increase the ad valorem property tax from the current 8.2741 mills to 9 mills. Some people have said the County Commission has been using reserve funds to offset the shortfall from property taxes. Is the current proposed tax increase necessary? Or should the County Commission cut expenses rather than to increase property taxes?**

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BERLON WEEKS

Weeks said management in county departments is a key. He was not specific, but Weeks said more efficiency would reduce spending and then a tax increase would not be required.

During his seven years on the Bronson Town Council, Weeks said they never increased taxes more than the rollback rate. When he left office, the town had two years' worth of sewer loan payments in reserve.

This and other strong standing in town finances, he said, happened from paying attention to every dollar spent.

“As a county commissioner,” Weeks said, “or a city councilman, it is your responsibility to question every single expenditure.”

Weeks said he believes it depends on department heads to give incentives to save money to return to the reserves. Without an incentive program, department heads feel driven to spend it all, he said.

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MATT BROOKS

Brooks said commissioners must plan and look to the future, and find a method to relieve the tax burden that exists.

Without planning for the future, and then increasing property taxes, Brooks said, "... is not something I'm willing to look at without scouring the budget as well as to do future planning."

Before raising property taxes on existing taxpayers, Brooks said he would want to first seek other revenue streams to tap.

Brooks said he intends to plan more and strive to create a better tax base.

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JOHN MEEKS

Commissioner Meeks said he is the lone candidate at the table that night who is currently serving.

He asked people to listen so that they would have a better idea of what is going on.

In the past three years, Meeks said, there was no increase in millage. Perhaps ad valorem property taxes should have been increase incrementally during that time, he said.

Meeks said that at the meeting where the five members of the board decided to increase the tax rate, no person would take the lead.

“It’s an election year,” he said, “and this job is important to me. I want to continue serving you as your county commissioner. But I had the backbone to pass the gavel to my co-chairman to make the motion to raise the millage rate to 9 mills.”

Back in 2005, he said, before land prices leapt, Levy County was collecting taxes at 9 mills. Property values dropped and today the value is the same as it was in 2005, he added.

There are almost 10,000 more people living in Levy County now than were living here in 2005, Meeks said, and as a result there is that much of a stronger demand on services provided by the Levy County Board of County Commissioners.

Meeks said the rest of the story on spending reserve funds down is that for years now there has been a budget created, but there was less spent than what was budgeted. This cash-forward effect from this fiscal year, Meeks said, will dramatically reduce the \$3 million seen as being needed from reserve revenue at the moment.

He shared more insights.

Half of the 1-cent optional sales tax revenue goes to pay a loan on the new jail, Meeks said. The other half of that sales tax revenue, he said, goes into reserve, even though it is not in that

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debt service fund.

So although it looks like reserve funds are being spent, that reserve fund includes half of the 1-cent optional sales tax, Meeks said.

The audit is good, Meeks said. Levy County is dealing with financial issues the same as other small counties.



CHETLEY BREEDEN

Breeden said increasing property taxes is the very last method to cope with a financial shortfall.

Planning and finding the most efficient methods will reduce expenses, he said. Having a planning board will prevent people being blindsided by new property taxes in the future, he said.

*** Do you believe the Levy County Commission should work in cooperation with cities to establish Advanced Life Support non-transport trucks in city fire departments? Or do you think ALS non-transport is a waste of time?**

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BERLON WEEKS

Weeks said people who have listened to him during this campaign have heard him be critical of the Levy County Department of Public Safety's method for fire department issues.

The 2005 Mizell-Hodges Report, Weeks said, showed Levy County lacks the population and other resources for a county fire department with paid firefighters.

Weeks proposes getting rid of the LCDPS fire side of the program. LCDPS EMS, he added, is doing a good job and he would leave that alone.

By getting rid of the expenses from the LCDPS fire side, Weeks said, that would open revenue that could be given to the municipal fire departments – which are fighting most of the fires in the county anyway.

That revenue would cover the expense of an ALS paramedic-firefighter in each station, Weeks said. He disagrees with having paramedic-firefighters driving ambulances. He wants the paramedics to focus only on that.

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MATT BROOKS

Yes, Brooks said, the county should work hand-in-hand with the municipalities.

“We’ve got to come up with solutions that are going to benefit all of the people in Levy County,” Brooks said. “We’ve got to keep finances in mind when we’re doing this as well.”

Brooks said the county is huge geographically. EMS is short-staffed currently and they are doing all they can now, Brooks said. He reminded the audience that these paramedics must stay with patients for an extended period, in contrast with metropolitan paramedics who are with patients for minutes.

Brooks recommends speaking with cities. Collaborate with them to see if an ALS plan can be something the county can add to its arsenal.

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John Meeks stands to answer the question as the other candidates and people in the audience listen.

JOHN MEEKS

Meeks said ALS should be available to the cities.

“Anything we can do to provide better service for our citizens,” Meeks said, “should be welcomed. But at what cost?”

He said a prime example of this question is from Chiefland. A couple of years ago, Chiefland approached the County Commission with a request for ALS non-transport in the city. County commissioners met with city commissioners twice in large public gatherings at the Tommy Usher Community Center, Meeks said.

Meeks said the city failed to come forward with a final plan. And there was not a discussion on funding, he said.

Meeks reminded listeners that when a firefighter responds to a medical call, his or her job is as a first responder – and that is a function of the firefighter.

When the level of care goes to ALS, Meeks continued, then that crosses over into the function of EMS.

The special assessments creating revenue from fire and EMS, he said, cannot be comingled. That issue was something the county was willing to work through, Meeks said.

If Chiefland was going to lose money for first responder calls, Meeks said he would come up with a plan to recoup those funds because they would be not performing as first responders but as ALS providers.

Meeks then jumped to a turning point. He said former LCDPS Director David Knowles is gone and the new LCDPS Director Mitch Harrell begins on Sept. 1. Meeks has met with the incoming director.

Meeks told Harrell one important thing he wants Harrell to focus on is a method that provides more equitable funding for all of the cities.

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CHETLEY BREEDEN

Breeden said the county and the cities should be working together.

“At the end of the day,” Breeden said, “we’re all Levy Countians here. It doesn’t need to be divided up into county and cities. We all need to be working together in the most positive manner that we possibly can.”

ALS is vital, he said, and the county commissioners must keep the budget in mind. It is important for all of the parties to have open dialogue with each other to see everyone’s needs, he said, and this may have not happened in every situation in this regard.

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*** Do you favor bringing more jobs to Levy County to reduce the requirement for people to travel to other counties to work?**

All of the candidates are in favor of bringing in more jobs.

Weeks said he favors a creation of a board comprised of members from every different part of the county and one county commissioner who would steer economic development in Levy County.

Weeks endorses taking an inventory of the county’s industrial commercial assets to see what is available for any interested parties. Weeks wants to see more manufacturing jobs here.

Meeks spoke about the previous programs and the Economic Development Fund program that is used in Putnam County now.

That program provides property taxes collected from businesses to be returned to those businesses to expand their business, create new jobs or grow their assets to increase the tax base, Meeks said.

As for Weeks’ proposal to take inventory, Meeks said that program is under way by the

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Nature Coast Business Development Council and it includes looking at undeveloped tracts that may be of interest to developers.

Breeden said he endorses business growth. He reminds people, though, that the attraction of rural living will disappear from Levy County without proper growth management.

He said Monterrey Boats, the A&N Corp. and other existing businesses that are here now are good models of the type of interests to encourage to locate in Levy County.

AN UNANSWERED QUESTION

Dr. Devaiah Pagidipati has invested millions of dollars in Regional General Hospital of Williston in the past two years, bringing new equipment and doctors, and revamping the hospital from top to bottom.

He has created a functioning hospital that provides 150 jobs for people qualified to provide healthcare in Williston for people who now do not have to drive to Ocala or Gainesville for the same care.

Dr. Pagidipati and his partner Jorge Perez are working to create a free-standing emergency room in Chiefland. They are striving to bring an urgent care center to Bronson and Cedar Key as well.

By expanding the medical services available in Levy County, more patients will not need ambulance transportation to Gainesville.

Regional General Hospital wants to bring the jobs for construction of new facilities, and for staffing the new medical centers, an RGH spokeswoman said Thursday night.

“What support can RGH count on from the county in return for creating these medical facilities?” she asked.

No candidate was given an opportunity to answer that question, because the audience applauded the question. However, Bibby moved on with a few more questions, never returning to that unanswered question.