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Second forum offers insight about Levy County Commission candidates



Jeff Hardison, publisher and owner of *HardisonInk.com* holds a gavel and microphone before serving as the moderator of the discussion in the Tommy Usher Community Center on Thursday evening (Aug. 4).

By Jeff M. Hardison © Aug. 6, 2016 @ 9:07 p.m.

Photos by Terry Witt

CHIEFLAND – The second of three events -- where all of the candidates for the Districts 1, 3 and 5 Levy County Commission races were invited -- happened on Thursday night (Aug. 4) in Chiefland. Where Chris Cowart had served as the moderator at the event in Cedar Key in late July, Jeff M. Hardison was the moderator at the event in Chiefland. David Bibby is the man scheduled to serve as moderator for the Aug. 18 event (from 6 to 8 p.m.), at the Pyper Kub Restaurant in Williston (near the airport).

Hardison and the candidates said they appreciate Regional General Hospital of Williston for hosting the event. They also thanked the City of Chiefland for the use of the Tommy Usher Community Center, and Hardison said he was appreciative of Chiefland Police Chief Robert Douglas and other law enforcement officers attending to assure the event was safe and orderly.

Like Cowart, Hardison went “off script” and allowed a candidate for superintendent of schools to speak. Jeff Edison was not at the Chiefland event, but Jerry Lawrence was.

Lawrence told about the woeful showing of academic results in Levy County recently, and then he shared with the audience that he has been able as a teacher to help students demonstrate their ability to improve and excel.

If elected to be the chief executive officer of the Levy County School District, Lawrence indicated that he believes he can serve the county better in that regard than the current assistant superintendent who is running to be superintendent.

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Following is information with the six candidates divided by districts with them being alphabetical, one over the other within the district races.

Chetley Breeden, candidate for District 3 in the race against incumbent County Commissioner Mike Joyner, sent an apologetic note to say that he had a prior engagement that was made before this event was scheduled. And that is why Breeden was absent on Aug. 4.

Incumbent District 5 Levy County Commissioner Danny Stevens was absent from the events in Chiefland and Cedar Key. Candidate Matt Brooks, who is seeking to replace Stevens, was at both of those events.

Some of the many questions asked on Aug. 4 are noted with answers from the candidates below.

Questions and Answers

*** Do you believe the Levy County Department of Public Safety needs to revise its operational protocol to allow paramedics more of a chance to take patients who can be treated at Regional General Hospital to Williston rather than to a hospital in Alachua, Marion or Citrus County if the drive time will be equal or less than if they went to one of those urban centers?**

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District 1

JOHN MEEKS

Meeks said protocols are living documents that are meant to be amended. He noted that he has sat in a meeting between former Levy County Department of Public Safety Director David Knowles and RGH staff.

Meeks said the county offered to make protocols “more friendly” in regard to the hospital.

“Whenever it comes to the safety of Levy County citizens, I will not allow things to be rewritten and rules to be modified to put Levy County citizens in danger,” Meeks said. “Calls that are able to be handled by the Williston hospital are sent to Williston hospital.

“If a patient decides to go to a different hospital,” Meeks continued, “that is out of the hands of our EMS staff.”

He said protocols can be reviewed and revised.

District 1

BERLON WEEKS

“Yes, I believe protocols should be changed,” Weeks said. “And I believe Regional General Hospital, from what I have heard, and from what I have seen when I have gone in there, they have done a very good job with people.

“If it is possible to take people there,” he continued, “and the hospital fits that bill, where they can fix those hurt people and help them, then why not take them there first?”

District 3

MIKE JOYNER

Joyner said his first choice for a hospital is Regional General Hospital of Williston.

If a person suffers a traumatic injury that is beyond what can be done at the RGH emergency room, then that patient cannot be taken there, he said.

Joyner said that when he or his family members are injured by cattle, RGH is his first choice of a place to seek medical help.

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District 5

MATT BROOKS

Brooks said it is a patient’s choice as to where they are taken, as long as they are conscious and coherent.

However, any protocol is up for review, he added, and in this case, especially since it takes

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residents out of Levy County, it should be reviewed.

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\* **Will you direct the new public safety director to work more with the existing hospital to help patients enjoy the benefits of being treated at RGH rather than at some more distant hospital?**

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## **District 1**

### **JOHN MEEKS**

Meeks said he looks forward to introducing incoming Levy County Public Works Director Mitch Harrell to Dr. Devaiah Pagidipati and the RGH staff so the two parties can discuss the procedures and equipment that needs to be in place to accommodate emergency patients taken there by ambulance.

Meeks added that he has seen the significant changes to improve RGH since Dr. Pagidipati bought the hospital, and brought in new equipment and a medical staff to increase available services.

Harrell, however, must do what he believes is in the best interest of the residents and visitors of Levy County who are injured or sick and need help at an emergency room or hospital, Meeks said.

As the new public safety director takes office on Sept. 1, Meeks said he intends to assure that the county and RGH get off on the right foot for progress into the future.

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## **District 1**

### **BERLON WEEKS**

Weeks said the essential point is what Harrell is presented in regard to how the county perceives RGH now.

“And I think as a county commissioner,” Weeks continued, “you go a long way to promote that business and help that business to succeed” in being able to continue to provide the 150 jobs to people in Williston.

Weeks said he understands that the County Commission cannot command the new public safety director to use a particular hospital. However, he continued, he knows the County Commission can advise Harrell to review RGH’s facilities to care for patients brought there by ambulance.

The key is to bring the hospital, the medical director and the director of public safety together to work out a plan that allows LCDPS EMS to bring people with medical problems that can be treated at RGH to RGH, Weeks said.

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## **District 3**

### **MIKE JOYNER**

Joyner said he plans to tell the new EMS director to do what he thinks is best for the public's safety.

If Mitch Harrell thinks Regional General Hospital of Williston is the best place to take patients, Joyner said, then that is what Harrell should do.

Joyner said he does not have the medical background himself to try to instruct Harrell in that regard, even though Joyner himself knows RGH is a fine hospital for emergency medical care for some medical problems.

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## **District 5**

### **MATT BROOKS**

Brooks said that as a business owner with managers of that business, he trusts the managers to make the right decisions, “but I also verify. That is a good business practice: Trust but verify.”

Given a gap in communication and working relationship has occurred, Brooks said that gap can be bridged with Harrell coming into the position in September. Brooks sees opening a dialogue between the county public safety department and RGH will build something good for the future.

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*** Will you as a commissioner support the licensing of a Chiefland Advanced Life Support non-transport truck?**

District 1

JOHN MEEKS

“I have never been opposed to ALS in Chiefland,” Meeks said.

He went on to say he was at the forefront of discussing the potential for Chiefland Fire Rescue to have it paramedics able to use ALS techniques prior to the arrival of a county ambulance.

Meeks said the county asked the city for plans on how the city would have the paramedics available, and for how the plan could be funded.

Chiefland provided as much information as it could, Meeks said. Some answers were unknown, Meeks said. There did appear to be a question about funding cuts from first responder calls, if the city went in as an ALS provider, he said.

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“I have always been in support of anything that makes our community safer for our citizens,” Meeks said.

District 1

BERLON WEEKS

Weeks said he felt having an Advanced Life Support non-transport truck was a novel idea that would help improve emergency medical service in Levy County.

When an ambulance goes to Gainesville, it is gone for a long time as it unloads a patient, restocks with supplies and then returns to service, Weeks said.

Weeks introduced a new idea during this forum. He mentioned the concept of defunding the Department of Public Safety’s high dollar fire department side, and give that money to the volunteer departments in Levy County.

Then this allows the volunteer departments to have a paramedic-firefighter on that municipal fire department staff, he said. Each municipal fire department would then have their own Advanced Life Support non-transport truck in service, he added.

“Yes, I am in favor of Advanced Life Support non-transport,” he said, “And I think it would be beneficial for our community to have.”

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District 3

MIKE JOYNER

“Am I in support of ALS? Yes,” Joyner said. “Am I in support of bankrupting this county? No.”

Joyner went on to say that no one knows what his wife and he felt as their son got his arm caught in a combine and cut off. He knows all about the need for an ALS level of service to patients as soon as possible.

Joyner indicated that from what he has seen, the prospect of adding an ALS non-transport truck for Chiefland Fire Rescue would be too expensive and potentially create too much liability for the county.

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District 5

MATT BROOKS

Brooks said he has spoken to many individuals about this question in the past few months.

In his opinion, Chiefland Fire Rescue brought a creative solution to the table. The people of Chiefland have done everything they could to attract a developer to put a hospital in that city for the past 10-plus years, Brooks said.

“You have to have commissioners who look at all options on the table,” Brooks said.

He wants to see all parties working together to resolve problems.

“You don’t dig your heels in,” Brooks continued, “and close your ears to things. You’ve got to listen to what the community is saying.”

With Chiefland serving the largest population of people with the least amount of funding for fire and EMS, Brooks said he is open to looking more at finding a method to provide an ALS non-transport truck in Chiefland.

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.

PUBLISHER’S NOTE: Due to me being a moderator, I was unable to cover this as well as I wanted to as a journalist. I anticipate being able to write a better story and have better photos from the event scheduled to be in Williston.