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Levy County Commission candidates share their views



Lilly Rooks (upper, left) and Ryan Bell (upper right) are seeking the Levy County Commission District 4 seat; and Rock Meeks (lower left) and Terance Reed are running against each other for the District 2 seat on the County Commission.

Story and Photos

By Jeff M. Hardison © Aug. 1, 2018 at 10:48 p.m.

WILLISTON – Two incumbent members of the Levy County Board of County Commissioners and two candidates seeking to take their seats spoke to people at the Saturday (Aug. 28) political forum held at Williston Middle High School.

Incumbent Lilly Rooks and candidate Ryan Bell are running against each other for

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the District 4 seat on the County Commission.

Incumbent Rock Meeks and candidate Terance Reed are running against each other for the District 2 seat on the County Commission.

At this event, all four candidates answered questions posed by audience members and read to them by WMHS student volunteers.

The event was hosted by the Citizens for an Engaged Electorate.

RYAN BELL

Ryan Bell introduced himself and said he is all about the family. He also cares about Levy County – the way of life here, progress in the county and the local economy.

From 2010 to 2014, Bell was a county commissioner, where he served as chairman for several of those years.

Among his accomplishments that he highlighted at the event, was his championing a budget overhaul as the chairman.

After a matter of hours of work, he and the other commissioners at the time cut \$2 million from the county expenses. This was 4 percent of a \$54 million annual budget, he noted.

This happened, he said, while keeping employee benefits in place and not requiring dramatic insurance changes for those families.

Among the changes he helped complete during his term was saving \$60,000 one year from advertising of legal ads.

Former Commissioner Bell also helped overhaul animal control programs in the county, inspired by his wife Crystal Marie.

“I was able to champion the weekend adoption events,” Bell said.

He also helped hire a county veterinarian to reduce overall operational costs as well as improve care for the dogs and cats being seen by Levy County Animal Services.

LILLY ROOKS

Lilly Rooks thanked the CEE for hosting the forum.

Rooks mentioned that she is a “full-time” commissioner for District 4. She spoke about some of her family members, as did Bell.

Rooks said she is a public servant who is always available to the people, and she is forward-thinking. She mentioned that millions of dollars in additional funding came to Levy County during her term because of her work on behalf of this fiscally-constrained county.

She mentioned that her record of working on behalf of the people of Levy County shows that she not only talks the talk, but she walks the walk.

ROCK MEEKS

Rock Meeks said he considers it an honor and a privilege to have served the people as a member of the Levy County Commission for the past four years.

During his term, he has met many people who he did not know before and this has been a blessing to him, Meeks said.

Meeks said he has six children, adding jokingly that since his wife is raising him, she has seven children.

By being available to the people and to help them resolve problems as a county commissioner during the past four years, Meeks said he feels this has been a true blessing for him.

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Meeks is a fifth-generation resident of Levy County, and his children are the sixth generation of his family here, he said.

During the past four years, Meeks said he and the other members of the County Commission have made tough choices. Previously, he continued, there was spending that was taking \$4 million annually from the reserve funds and now the County Commission has a budget that is balanced, without having to spend money that is in reserve.

TERANCE REED

Terance Reed, like the three candidates before him, had two minutes to introduce himself.

He thanked the CEE for the opportunity to participate.

Reed has lived in Levy County for 43 years he said, and he is married to Whitney Mills Reed. He mentioned his three children who have graduated or will graduate from public school in Levy County.

For the past 25 years, he has been in business for himself at Reed Automotive of Chiefland. This experience is what he brings to serve the people on the County Commission.

Prior to owning his own business, Reed worked for Winn-Dixie as an assistant manager, where he helped customers and employees.

At Griner Chevrolet (since renamed a couple of times), he was an assistant service manager, where he again managed business and helped people.

During the past 25 years as the owner of Reed Automotive, he has enjoyed helping the success of a business owner with many good customers.

“I will do everything I can do to give back to this community,” Reed said. “I am a firm believer in our first responders.”

He tells visitors to the area that Levy County is a wonderful place to live and raise a family. Reed said he will do what he can to assure the level of service for safety is maintained in the county.

Reed said he plans to work with everyone in the county, and in the cities to keep Levy County the best place to live.

The four candidates answered questions from the audience.

Among the questions was for the candidates to address their plans and goals.

PLANS AND GOALS

Candidate Reed said one of the biggest things he has found in speaking with people in the county is that communication within the county is vital.

Reed said that he found in speaking with county employees, there were things that happened that they were not pleased with, and the way things came to be was especially disliked.

The county and the cities need to work together on the same missions, he said.

As far as helping people, Reed said he is a phone call away from anybody at any time, and he will represent the people 100 percent.

In answering this question. **Meeks** said the current County Commission has created incentives to attract business. Moving forward, he sees the county clearing up some zoning issues to help growth.

Meeks said it is important to set a structure from the bottom up.

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Construction of single-family homes in Levy County, Meeks said, is happening now at a rate he has never seen here before.

Natural resources in Levy County, Meeks said, is attracting people to the area, and he endorses promoting this to bring people to the area.

Meeks sees single-family homes as helping to build a better tax base in the county. Being open for new business to come to Levy County is among his goals, Meeks said.

Rooks said she is working on programs to help the people of Levy County. She mentioned flooding is a problem in parts of her district in the county.

Rooks said she is utilizing the University of Florida to help engineer a plan to alleviate flooding. Then, finding funding for the plans, Rooks said, is the next phase of resolving this issue.

By working with UF, Rooks believes the university will write grant proposals to help fund the flood control projects.

Bell said one goal for his next term in office is to reduce wasteful spending through another budget overhaul.

During his first term, Bell said the County Commission went through the budgets with each of the county's constitutional officers. Each budget was reviewed line by line, he said.

Another goal Bell shared was to be very proactive in fleet and technology maintenance. Dated materials and infrastructure, he said, is an issue – whether it is technology or vehicles.

Improving employee morale and retention is another goal Bell has set to approach. If the people on the team are not happy, they are less inclined to take care of the machines they use, and are not working as well to serve the public, he said.

Meanwhile, while assuring the county's workforce is pleased with their working conditions, another general goal, Bell said, will be to increase the level of accountability for each department. He wants to hold everyone accountable, but to take care of the county workers who take care of the residents and visitors.

Bell said there is another area where he intends to improve county services. The people in the Levy County Animal Services Department need to have the tools they need to perform their jobs. Bell said he plans to help the department obtain what it needs to continue its successful ongoing improvements.

Bell mentioned that he is pro-veterans, pro-law enforcement, pro-accountability, pro-conservative approach – and he favors smaller government.