

STPUD candidates square off

By Kathryn Reed



STATELINE – Eight of the 11 candidates for the South Tahoe Public Utility District board boasted about their expertise and reasons voters should elect them during a noon hour forum Wednesday.

Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe gathered the group at Harveys to discuss water issues. Nearly 70 were in attendance to hear what the candidates had to say.

Jimmy Martin running for Seat 1 had an emergency that prevented him from attending, firefighter Scott Swift (Seat 5) had to work, and Eric Schafer (Seat 5) had former board member Chris Strohm sit in for him because he is out of the country.

Three seats are open on the Nov. 3 ballot, with all incumbents trying to retain their position.

Seat 1 pits incumbent Ernie Claudio against John Adamski, Chris Cefalu and Martin.

Seat 2 has incumbent Jim Jones challenged by Kenny Curtzwiler, John Runnels and Tod Williamson.

Seat 5 Schafer's domain, with Peggy Cocomes and Swift wanting to unseat him.

All candidates were allowed to introduce themselves and then were asked the same questions before giving a short closing statement.

California mandated water meters and the Porter-Cologne Act, which requires wastewater to be shipped out of the basin, were wrapped into one question.

Seat 5 candidates went first, with Strohm (aka Schafer) passing.

Cocores worries about what it would cost to keep wastewater here and how difficult it would be to get the federal legislation changed. She recognizes meters are a reality residents are going to have to live with based on the state regs.

Jones pointed out exported water can be used for fire protection. He said public hearings are planned in the coming months to address rates as they relate to metered customers. "Eighty-two percent of the cost of providing water is fixed. It has to be paid for by everybody," Jones said.

Seat 2 candidates Runnels said it's necessary for the district to continue to look for grants to defer the expense of meters away from ratepayers. As the largest user of electrical power in the basin, Runnels said he'd like to see the district's wastewater converted into electricity. But he's also in favor of investigating if the water could be used for snowmaking and irrigation.

Williamson wants to ensure locals are not saddled with the meter bill, since right now second homeowners are subsidizing locals to a great extent because of the flat rate system. When it comes to recycled water, he is worried about what it would do to Lake Tahoe.

Curtzwiler said his rates doubled when a meter was put in. He wants to take the fight to Sacramento. He believes the treated water is so clean it should be used in the basin. He said to overturn the act "it will take a lot of tenacity and bull headedness, which I have."

Seat 1 candidate Adamski said the focus needs to be on upgrading the water system, not keeping gray water in the basin. He would also like to see that water turned into electricity. He said the district has known about the metering for a while, and that it will take a lot of work between STPUD and ratepayers to make it work.

“The district has the flexibility to set the rates to meet the needs of the community,” Cefalu said in regards to meters. He likes how the wastewater is being sent to Alpine County.

Claudio talked about how the district has tried to get out of the meter regulations because of being in a Nevada watershed instead of California. He is in favor of continuing to work on seeking an extension because of the short building season.

Salaries – that was the subject of the second question.

Claudio explained employee salaries were set based on surveys. “During the Angora Fire, firefighters never ran out of water because of the employees,” he said, pointing to their ability to do their job under pressure.

Cefalu said salaries will always be contentious in a down economy, and that there is a fine line between paying a person their worth and being overpaid.

Adamski is a former employee of STPUD who said, “It’s important not to overpay, but it’s more important to pay for experience. The district has more important issues than salaries.”

Curtzwiler explained the average compensation package is \$111,000.

Williamson also said it’s a fine line, adding, “You can’t bring in new people and pay them less and expect the same quality.”

Runnels said, “Salaries need to be reflective of the

community, not the state.”

Jones is in favor of keeping salaries at a rate that will allow the district to recruit and retain qualified personnel.

Cocores recognizes nothing can be done about salaries now, but it's the future that needs to be considered. “If salary increases cause rate increases, we need to look at it,” she said. “(Salaries) can't be adjusted on the back of ratepayers.”

Strohm (Schafer) said the district is competing for employees with other agencies so it's important to have competitive salaries. “Eric is uniquely qualified with his CPA background,” Strohm said of Schafe's ability to handle financial issues.

Another forum will be at the South Lake Tahoe Public Utility District office – 1275 Meadow Crest Drive, South Lake Tahoe on Oct. 6 from 6-9pm.