

El Dorado County sheriff's candidates politely spar

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Relaxing the renewal process for people carrying concealed weapons and knowing the budget will be a critical issue facing the next sheriff of El Dorado County are two things the six candidates for the job agree on.

During a lunch meeting Wednesday at Harrah's Lake Tahoe that was hosted by Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe, six questions were presented to the men who want to be sheriff.



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The candidates were lined up as they will appear on the June 8 ballot: Ernie Hillman, retired sheriff's captain; Larry Hennick, retired sheriff's sergeant; George Nielsen, Placerville police chief; Craig Therkildsen, El Dorado County sheriff's captain; Bob Luca, retired chief of the California Bureau of Investigation; and John D'Agostini, district attorney's investigator.

The need for a new sheriff is because Jeff Neves left in December before his term was to expire at the end of this

year. Undersheriff Fred Kollar was appointed to be interim sheriff until the next sheriff is elected. He had planned to retire at the end of the year and will still do so.

If no candidate receives more than 50 percent in the June primary, then there will be a run-off in November.

On Wednesday, each had to explain what sets them apart from the others seated at the front of the room.

Hillman: "My experience differentiates me. I've held every sworn position except sheriff (in El Dorado County). I'm the only candidate with military experience. I served two terms in Vietnam."

Hennick: "I've worked the streets here. I have a home here. I have a back to basics approach."

Nielsen: "I'm a top executive of a law enforcement agency now."

Therkildsen: "I'm working for you now. I've worked up here for 4.5 years."

Luca: "I didn't spend my whole career in one department doing the same thing over and over again."

D'Agostini: "My age. I have three, four terms in me." He is also the only candidate currently with an elected position. He is on the Pioneer School District board of education.

Another question posed to them was: "What steps will they take to ensure the budget ax doesn't continue to fall on the sheriff's department?"

Hillman: "I can't promise you it will not take a hit. I will argue for every dime we can get. It may be an uncomfortable situation for the Board of Supervisors, but I will take them on."

Hennick: "You need to be revenue generating. With alternative sentencing programs you have them pay for their time so they are not spending time in jail. Use asset seizure and forfeiture."

Nielsen: "First, I have experience doing these things. You focus on staffing. I transferred a management person to the streets. We must prioritize public safety. I've written five (grants) in the last year and got three. That's results."

Therkildsen: "We've made cutbacks and have not reduced the number of deputies on the street. We are not going to cut street deputies."

Luca: "The role of sheriff is to set priorities. I've managed large budgets. The role of the sheriff is to be in the community, at the Legislature to lobby."

D'Agostini: "There will be cuts. The last place I want to cut is the boot on the street. I will do a line item review of the budget. Grants are great, but some come with long tails."

Hillman's 30-year career is all with El Dorado County, including a stint as lieutenant on the South Shore. Although now retired, he says his batteries are recharged to take on the job as sheriff.

This is Hennick's third run for sheriff. He wants to bring back the mounted patrol, have a resident deputy at Meek's Bay and have the DARE program in schools.

Nielsen says in the last five years he has helped to reduce the crime rate in Placerville by 53 percent. As a law enforcement executive now, he believes he could hit the ground running.

Therkildsen, the only candidate to have his ballot statement translated into Spanish, believes he too will not need a learning curve because he is immersed in the department now as

a captain.

Luca believes his diverse background with the California Bureau of Investigation and as an investigator with the El Dorado County District Attorney's Office is an asset. His priorities are to stop sexual predators and elder abuse.

D'Agostini wants to rebuild community trust. His priorities are solving property crimes and increasing respect for civil rights.

There will be another sheriff's candidates' forum April 20 at 7pm in the El Dorado Hills Community Services District Pavilion, 1021 Harvard Way, El Dorado Hills.

California residents have until May 24 to register for the June 8 primary. There are a slew of positions up for grabs on the ballot.