

Douglas County Commission races heating up



Wesley Rice and Janet Murphy are vying for the District 4 seat that represents Lake Tahoe on the Douglas County Commission.

By Susan Wood

STATELINE – You know it's a new day and age of politics when much of the focus for local government is on the party system.

Hence, the upcoming primary election for Nevadans is June 12, a week after California's, and the candidates running for two seats on the Douglas County Board of Commissioners let it be known they're steadfast Republicans.

Such is the case at the candidate forum sponsored by the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce and the Tahoe Citizens Committee on May 9 in which current District 2 Commissioner Steve Thaler is being challenged by former chief financial officer and police officer John Engels, who's relatively new

to the Douglas County government scene.

Tahoe residents Wesley Rice, a deputy constable, and Janet Murphy, an engineer-turned-government consultant, also squared off in front of about 50 people to hear their ideas for the District 4 seat Nancy McDermid is being termed out on.

All candidates pledged at some point to attest to Republican values – a concept almost nonexistent years ago when the two-party system shared the same ballot.

Murphy even used the “drain the swamp” Trumpism when referring to being a fiscal conservative and making government more accountable to the taxpayers who seek getting the most out of District 4.

For District 2, the cowboy hat-clad Engels called himself nothing short of a staunch conservative Republican, equating affordable housing to gang housing and implying local government employees are paid too much in comparison to other jurisdictions in Nevada. The home page of his website displays the National Rifle Association logo, an inferred symbol of a no-holds-barred form of governing where might prevails over problems.

The more refined Thaler used his cerebral recollection of balancing a complex budget anchored by a \$52 million General Fund as an “always challenging” but necessary task to be proud of without gutting it.

The District 4 race also represents a contrast of sorts in personalities, despite Rice and Murphy being neighbors five houses apart. Rice and Thaler, going for separate seats, appeared to tag team with hosting coffee chats together – one at Casey’s this Saturday.

The mild-mannered Rice, who serves on the Round Hill General Improvement District, opposed Engels characterization of the gang problem as not bad because of superior law enforcement.

Like Engels, he also served as a police officer.

Nonetheless, Rice was predominantly placed at odds with the high energy, multi-tasking, shoot-from-the-hip style of Murphy, who made many of her take-no-prisoner points off the cuff. The experienced administrator for the Tahoe Douglas Utility District seemed to be peppered with questions from the chamber, citizen committee and audience by moderator Steve Teshara about whether her commitment level would be in jeopardy because of her busy schedule or dual party affiliation. She previously ran decades ago as an independent but now considers herself "an independent thinker."

"I can do the job," the Zephyr Cove resident repeatedly countered in various ways, making the case it's "all government" where serving on different boards can mean sharing crossover information.

In November, the winner of the June Republican primary will face Kristi Kandel, a real estate consultant running as an independent with the goal of fixing infrastructure and balancing the vacation home rental quandary among other things.

The candidates never shied away from or ran out of topics to discuss.

"Tiregate" – Douglas County's debacle involving a \$1 million embezzlement by a former employee was described as shameful and embarrassing by all the candidates. The product of a grand jury investigation may have represented the one item they all agreed should never happen again with proper checks and balances.

Thaler promised those listening: "The criminal side is yet to come."

Vacation home rentals, growth, cost-cutting, congestion, relationship with the Nevada Department of Transportation and

the abundant supply of general improvement districts rounded out a lengthy list of discussion items.

“Congestion has become unbearable,” Engels exclaimed.

The tourism-driven topic came up again at the prospect of NDOT proposing the concept of reducing Highway 50 down to two lanes.

“It became four lanes for a reason,” Murphy said. Still, she understands why NDOT would want to make the road safer.

Rice partially agreed with his opponent by adding it took his daughter three hours to drive from Meyers to Round Hill on a holiday weekend; a reason to keep it four lanes.

While serving on the board now, Thaler accused the agency of not vetting the lane-reduction idea among government officials before putting it in the public eye. That said, he also noted the relationship with the county as: “working better than it ever has.”

“The best government is the government closest to the people” appeared to be the mantra of the night as the candidates discussed the need for multiple GIDs in the county. Rice listed Round Hill’s as only costing residents \$111 a month for all utility services.

Another phrase in Murphy’s repertoire – “let ‘em retire” – suggested employees leaving the county wouldn’t need to be replaced if others are cross-trained. She also believes the county should police the taxation of VHRs with more scrutiny.

Growth and development resembled a mixed bag of opinions related to the building of a Tahoe events center in the redevelopment area and a loop road to surround it.

All in all, the forum was well received by attendees, who provided limited applause but favored the listen-only mode.

Gardnerville resident Dave Maxwell sat attentively the entire time. Afterward, he told Lake Tahoe News he believed the candidates represented a broad spectrum of opinions and felt the topics put forth were good.

Maxwell would like affordable housing to be considered "quality housing."

Teshara ended the hour-plus session reminding them they will need to be registered Republican to vote for any of the candidates speaking that night.