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ELECTION 2018 - Council hopefuls have their say

By Derek Gomes, Staff Writer

PORTSMOUTH - Eleven of the candidates vying for a spot on the seven-member Town Council this November participated in a candidates' forum Thursday night that was hosted by the League of Women Voters of Newport County.

The sheer number of people seated at the dais in Portsmouth Town Council chambers ensured there was repetition in their answers to questions posed by moderator Erin Bollard.

When J. Mark Ryan, a Democratic incumbent, was the last candidate to answer a question regarding who should be responsible for the upkeep of Stringham and Burma roads, he quipped "I think most of the valid points have been made."

Still, the forum provided an outlet for the candidates to introduce themselves, explain how their background will serve them well as a town councilor and provide their vision to maintain the quality of life for those who call Portsmouth home.

The questions focused on: What recommendations the candidates want the Charter Review Committee, which convenes next year, to bring forward; How much the town should rely on borrowing money to fund projects; Whether the town should consider regionalizing services; and Who should take responsibility for the two roads that the Navy hopes to relinquish.

Regarding the Charter Review Committee, Democrat Daniela Abbott said it should consider amending the language to mandate the town have an engineer on staff. "It does say we may have one, which unfortunately means it will never be put in the budget," she said. The lack of an engineer makes the town reliant on hiring consultants to fill the void, Abbott added.

David Gleason, an independent incumbent, called for clarification from the committee whether dual office holding is permitted in town. He is a member of both the council and Portsmouth Water and Fire District.

Keith Hamilton, a Republican incumbent, said the town is being "short-changed" by having partisan local elections, which precludes federal employees from running.

Regarding the merits of issuing bonds was raised. Republican Larry Fitzmorris responded, "You have to understand debt is not free, and it's also hazardous." He explained that bond rating agencies will weigh the town's total debt and pension obligations when determining its bond rating.

Paul Kesson, a Republican incumbent, also stressed concerns about town finances. "This last budget I wasn't happy with and didn't vote for because [the tax increase] was so close to the max [allowed]," he said.

Peter Roberts, an independent candidate, said tax increases were placing an undue burden on many households including his own, and that some taxpayer money was being spent on "frivolous things."

Democrat Leonard Katzman said the state has not upheld its responsibility in funding the Portsmouth School Department. With his experience as an activist, he said he would work to get things accomplished at the Statehouse.

The candidates also spoke about what philosophy they would bring to the panel.

"It is not enough to simply identify problems," Linda Ujifusa, a Democratic incumbent, said. "It is only by working together we can identify the most important problems and find the very best solutions."

"I believe in open and honest communication with all of our stakeholders, fiscal responsibility and excellence in town services ..." said Democrat Andrew Kelly.

"I think the main reason that I'm running is about helping people," Democrat Ray Davis said. The quality of life in town depends on "the decisions that are made by the Town Council."

Candidates Kevin Aguiar, Debra Cardoza, Elizabeth Pedro and Jeffrey Richard did not attend the forum. dgomes@newportri.com