

Council Hopefuls Debate at Forum

Published in *The News-Gazette* on Sep. 28, 2022

The Lexington City Council candidates appeared to have more to agree upon than to disagree with.

At a virtual City Council candidate forum hosted by 50 Ways Rockbridge last Wednesday, two Rockbridge County high school students moderated the forum with questions the four candidates – Nicholas Betts, Collette Barry-Rec, David Sigler, and Chuck Smith - had received ahead of time.

They are running for three seats this fall.

One of the points of disagreement between the candidates was over whether or not school board members should be elected rather than the current policy where Council appoints the members, and what qualifications they should have.

A referendum on switching to the election of school board members is on this November's ballot in Lexington.

Barry-Rec explained that one of the qualifications she thought school board members needed was "someone who has or has had children or grandchildren in the school system."

Betts disagreed on the qualification. "I don't think they necessarily have to have had children in the Lexington City Schools, but I think they need to have taught elsewhere or had experience in education elsewhere," Betts said. However, he did not state whether he supported elected or appointed school board members.

Sigler agreed that candidates needed to have educational experience and continued to voice his support of letting voters decide who's on the school board.

"Appointing citizens to the school board has always been one of the most stressful decisions I've been faced with," Sigler said. "I signed the petition to put this question on the ballot. I've been consistent in my comments for years to say that when the public has a role in a local decision, the outcome improves going forward."

Another marked difference between the candidates focused on City Council's code of conduct which states that "professional and personal conduct of members must be above reproach and avoid even the appearance of impropriety ... members shall refrain from ... verbal attacks upon the character or motives of other members of the Lexington City Council, boards, commissions, and committees, the staff or public."

Sigler and Smith felt that before the election, candidates should abide by the code.

"Tweets and Facebook posts ... are just an extension, I believe, of our speech and should be regarded as such," Smith said. "I would apply if the candidacy is also subjected to that code of conduct, we should be held to a higher standard of civil discourse."

Betts felt that comments made before the election should be left up for voters to decide and Barry-Rec agreed with the sentiment.

"Now, I think that as far as prior to election, I think it's up to the public to decide what they think," Betts said. "If they think the candidates have lived up to an acceptable level of conduct prior to election, and then from there, I think we all need to keep each other in check."

Other divergence appeared over the issue of relations with Washington and Lee University. Both Sigler and Smith have spouses who work for the university, and they reaffirmed their commitment to recuse themselves from matters dealing with the university to avoid any conflict of interest.

Barry-Rec and Betts maintained that they had no affiliation or relationship that would create conflicts of interest with the school.

"As the only one of the four candidates that does not have a tie to W&L or VMI, I am hoping to bring to City Council a voice for the many citizens who do not have ties to either of those great institutions," Barry-Rec said. "We need to be very aware of the impact on removing more and more property from the tax rolls."

Betts, who is a graduate of the Washington and Lee School of Law, asserted he also has no conflict of interest.

“I have no affiliation currently with the university,” Betts said. “My view on this is that I think they're going to be a great synergy. If the city and the university work together.”

When asked about their broader plans for Council, the candidates had different priorities.

Betts, if elected, wants to focus on bringing more affordable housing and young talent to the community.

“I think if we can have policies that facilitate affordable housing ... if you look at zoning and ordinances and find a way so that we can expand affordable housing in the city of Lexington ... that will help us grow our working age population,” Betts said.

Sigler and Smith made a commitment to “teamwork,” to work seamlessly to create a dialogue between both the county and city governments as well as local residents.

“When you have two factors, the Citizens United ruling back in 2010... [and] put social media on top of that [it has] created more divisive dialogue,” Smith said. “I hope we can move to remove those obstacles as we move forward to create the team that David is speaking of as we move forward to make Lexington the best place that it can be.”

Barry-Rec agreed on the need to work together to face what she sees as “hard times coming, starting this winter.”

“I see hard times coming with practically promised food shortages, energy shortages and if there's any time that we need to pull together and work as a team, it is now,” Barry-Rec said. “Some of our neighborhoods are struggling and we need to tune into their needs.”

Early in-person voting for City Council and other offices has begun, stretching from Sept. 23 until Nov. 5, with Election Day on Nov. 8.