

Candidates tackle issues at town forum

By Jeanne Davant

Candidates for Mayor and contested City Council seats described their approaches to solving the city's needs at a forum Monday night at City Hall.

The Bulletin was a co-sponsor of the forum, at which more than 140 people showed up to hear the candidates' views and ask them questions.

First up were Matt Carpenter and Karen Cullen, who are seeking the vacant Ward Three seat.

"Everything that gets accomplished (in Manitou) is by everybody getting involved," Carpenter said in summarizing his views. "It's about all of us getting involved. It doesn't do any good to be the red light all of the time. We have to come up with ideas that everybody is going to run with."

Cullen said she has been "extremely involved" in Manitou since she arrived.

"A water main break in 2007 closed our business for four months," she said. "That gave me the experience to do this job. I asked questions every day about what was going on.... I'm a business owner who supports businesses as well as residents."

In answers to various questions, Carpenter said he wants to see details of where the city's financial contribution to economic development organizations such as the Economic Development Council and the Chamber of Commerce is going.

"I think there needs to be more accountability," he said.

To balance the budget, he said he would look at lowering salaries rather than cutting staff, especially in the Police Department. "I want to look at ways to bring more people in," he said.

Carpenter, who said he has frequently run the Incline, said he "would rather see it closed than see it stay in its present state. If it's opened, it needs to be done in a manner that doesn't affect residents and that it becomes an asset."

In response to a question from Cullen, Carpenter said he thinks the Parking Authority Board needs more oversight. He said he thinks residential parking problems should be addressed first.

Cullen said the economic development organizations are continuing to work together to find efficiencies and that the city should continue to support the EDC, BID and Chamber.

"Economic development and tourism are very, very important," she said. As for cutting those organizations' budgets, "I'm not sure that's feasible, (but) we need to develop that as a Council."

If faced with making budget cuts, Cullen said she thought there were creative ways to avoid layoffs, including requesting employees to take voluntary furloughs and cutting energy costs by shutting offices and working longer days.

She said she thought Manitou needs to be involved in decisions about the Incline, even though the city doesn't own any of the land it crosses.

Answering a question from Carpenter, Cullen said communication between the city and residents could be improved by e-mails and newspapers.

Both Carpenter and Cullen said they support the idea of a single trash-hauling company.

Mayoral candidates Nancy Barnes, Rick Barry and Marc Snyder began with opening statements.

Barnes said she thinks the first thing the new Council should do is "get its head together. Council has to be of one mind to make this city better, make the city safe, and look after its welfare."

Barry said the city needs a vision and strategic plan as to "where we're going as a city.... The first thing we have to do as a Council is decide how we're going to work together."

Snyder said he thinks the city relies too heavily on sales taxes.

"We have to diversify our revenues and not rely on tourism," Snyder said, as well as look at ways to reduce rising costs.

While the candidates said they appreciated the work Eric Drummond has done as mayor, they would do some things differently.

"I'm always out walking, talking to people to see what we can do as a community to make everything better," Barnes said.

Barry said he would seek to set up standards of behavior and goals for the further as a Council, as well as meeting with citizens. "Manitou shouldn't be ruled by City Council. City Council should serve the residents," he said.

Snyder said he would keep regular office hours for appointments and for "people to stop by and tell me what's on their mind." He said he would insist on maintaining decorum at Council meetings while encouraging all groups to weigh in on issues.

Answering other questions, Barry said he thinks "we have to look outside downtown" for sustainable sources of funding. He said the city should take the lead in brokering an agreement on the Incline among the three organizations that own it, and that residents on upper Ruxton Avenue should be involved in the process.

Barry said he thinks the current Council has made the right moves in green planning and reduction of the city's footprint.

Snyder said he thinks urban renewal areas on the east and west sides of town offer potential for diversifying Manitou's economy to include "something like an outdoor gear store and a brew pub." He said he'd also like to look at installing photo-radar on Highway 24 and to put "a mini-Incline" on Higinbotham Flats.

He said people using the Incline are causing parking headaches on Ruxton Avenue and downtown and that he supported opening it properly if an agreement can be reached.

Ultimately, though, he said, "I want to build a new one that's built properly."

Snyder said he believes a sustainable environment is a key to Manitou's future.

"We need to follow through with the energy audit we're doing right now, having all of our buildings evaluated," he said. One idea is to heat and cool City Hall with Mansions Park spring water. He said he would also explore solar-powered streetlights, which could save the city \$90,000, a micro hydro plant and wind power at the reservoir.

He said that while all options are on the table for increasing revenues, he would carefully weigh a property tax increase, which would hit commercial properties harder than residents.

"I would like to have a residential amenities fee... as opposed to a tax, as a way to say we believe in the services we have and are willing to pay for them," Snyder said.

Barnes said she would work with citizens to field ideas for sustainable revenue sources. She said she supports an honor system collection box for users of the Incline and that a shuttle might help to relieve parking problems. She also supports continuing to find greener alternatives.

"I think Manitou is leading El Paso County in becoming green," she said.

Barnes said she supports fee increases rather than tax hikes to support city amenities like the pool, library and mineral springs.

All three mayoral candidates said they would go slow in making any change to the city's 5 percent excise tax, which is levied on ticket sales, and that they favor a discussion process that would involve all affected parties.

Snyder proposed a commission to study the question and suggested that the city might consider annexing Cave of the Winds, which is just outside the city limits in El Paso County.

All three also said they support Ballot Measure 2D, which would change the way the city funds capital improvements. The amendment eliminates the requirement that one-sixth of General Fund revenues be transferred to the Capital Improvements Fund. Those revenues currently cannot be used for any other purpose. The measure would allow the city flexibility in using those funds and would set up a specific process for developing the capital improvements budget.

Each candidate was asked what he or she would most like to accomplish as mayor.

Barnes said that she would like to see the downtown revitalization project completed, since she was a member of the previous Council that initiated the project.

Barry said he would like to see a mission statement, vision plan, and a plan to accomplish goals including accountability.

Snyder said he would most want to rebalance the city's financial situation by developing new sources of revenue and to "heal the rift that seems to have developed with the business community."

Candidates for uncontested Council races also made brief statements at the forum, which was co-sponsored by the Colorado Springs Independent and Citizens Project.

Michael C. Gerbig Jr., is unopposed for the City Council Ward One seat, and Ingrid Richter is the sole candidate for the City Council Ward Two seat.

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