

## City Council candidates focus on neighborhoods

By Hayes Hickman

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Protecting Knoxville neighborhoods and their property values — whether from encroaching commercial development, the blight of neglected lots or any perceived burden of hosting new homeless housing — is the popular theme among this year's City Council candidates.

Amid the appeals to homeowners, though, calls for more small business growth have been the exception among the 10 candidates vying for five open seats in the Nov. 3 general election.

City finance officials' early projections suggest that the hardest decisions are yet to come as the national recession's deepest impact on local tax revenues likely will be felt in the next fiscal year, beginning July 1.

All of the candidates generally have promised to be shrewd stewards of city tax dollars, although none has suggested where they would specifically consider spending cuts. Rather, they have only drawn a line in the sand to oppose any possible property tax increase.

Keeping city government open and accessible has been another common pledge. Several contenders have proposed holding regular community meetings to gather constituents' feedback.

The primary election, held three weeks ago, garnered 4,093 votes, with only about a dozen votes separating the top two finishers in two of the races.

Knoxville's 104,000-plus registered city voters have the chance to reverse that trend, beginning today, with the start of early voting for the general election.

Unlike September's district-only primary, this time, voters citywide may cast a ballot in all of the races to decide the next freshman majority on the nine-seat council in its largest turnover since 2001.

1st District:

Fresh face vs. experience

The choice of candidates for South Knoxville's 1st District is largely one of new ideas versus experience, between architect Robert Marlino and Nick Pavlis, a former at-large city councilman.

Pavlis was term-limited in 2003, although the City Charter only limits elected officials from serving more than two consecutive terms.

The general election will be the "ultimate referendum" on whether voters want him back, said Pavlis, who won by 11 votes in the district primary.

Marlino, who has billed himself as a citizen politician, says the term-limits issue is one between Pavlis and the voters.

As for first-term priorities, Pavlis, 54, calls for stepped up codes enforcement to cure blighted lots and stabilize residential property values for the sake of improving home ownership rates in the district.

"It's a great place for starter homes," said Pavlis, a regional government and media relations director for Charter Communications. "But if three houses down is a blighted property, that young family is less likely to (buy a home)."

Marlino, 47, production manager for Smee + Busby Architects, said he wants to continue the smart growth momentum behind the city's redevelopment plans for the South Waterfront, Vestal community and Chapman Highway commercial corridor as the best means of improving the south side as a whole.

Both candidates also have called for a comprehensive review of the city-county 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness in the wake of the former Flenniken Elementary School's slated renovation as permanent housing for the chronically homeless, despite near-unanimous community opposition.

"The whole process needs to be changed for site selection," said Marlino, suggesting that a comprehensive list of suitable sites countywide be drafted in cooperation with neighborhood groups before another facility is proposed. "We need to show people ... that that ideal, that we would all share in the responsibility, hasn't gone away."

Complicating such ideas are the possible implications of the federal Fair Housing Act. A city-county task force to draft siting guidelines was stopped before it could begin earlier this year after lawyers warned the approach could be considered discriminatory.

"I can understand that you can't discriminate," said Pavlis. "But you can have an intelligent conversation of where it goes."

2nd District:

Balancing business, neighborhood needs

The 2nd District's West Knoxville neighborhoods, such as West Hills and Sequoyah Hills, are some of the city's most well-organized, while its retail centers, namely West Town Mall and Turkey Creek, account for the lion's share of local sales tax revenues.

In a race that reflects the district's dualities, architect and candidate Duane Grieve is active in the Bearden Council umbrella of neighborhood groups, and as president of Scenic Knoxville, he spearheaded a successful city ban against any new digital billboards.

Meanwhile, his opponent, Ken Knight, has been one of the most vocal candidates on the ballot in advocating for a business-friendly city and says his customer service skills as general manager of the downtown Crowne Plaza Knoxville hotel would be an asset to taxpayers.

Grieve, owner of Grieve Associates Architects, is a proponent of smart growth development that preserves historic buildings and values natural resources, such as local ridge lines and hillsides.

He also echoes the Bearden Council's recent complaints over "broken" processes within the Metropolitan Planning Commission, calling for more responsiveness to residents' concerns on planning and zoning issues.

"The neighborhoods, in my opinion, feel like they're not being heard," said Grieve, 63. "If you have groups that are not communicating, that don't have respect for one another, the process is broken."

Knight, 49, said his first priority in office would be to reach out to local entrepreneurs for ideas about how to improve the city's permitting processes for new and expanding businesses.

"If you're wanting to open or grow a business, time is money," Knight said. "What I've been told by people is that the process can be cumbersome. It's more 'What's wrong?' rather than 'What can we do to get this done?'"

Grieve, a member of the Knoxville Historic Zoning Commission who has served on various task forces for three city mayors, won the widest margin of victory of any candidate in the primary races, with 65 percent of the district vote.

Knight, however, took nearly 49 percent of the citywide vote in a close race for the same seat against incumbent Barbara Pelot in 2005. In the four years since, he's become a fixture at council meetings and community events, and currently serves on the Knoxville Tourism & Sports Corp. board of directors.

3rd District:

Better communication, being heard

Retired advertising and marketing executive Gerry Holman considers himself as “an average guy” with the communication skills to make ordinary Knoxvilleians feel included in local government decisions.

Holman, 66, also offers “bold representation” to constituents in the 3rd District of Northwest Knoxville who will lobby for its fair share of resources.

“We pay a lot of taxes and we deserve to be heard,” he said.

Brenda Palmer, 63, a retired high school civics teacher and administrator, also touts effective communication as the key to the 3rd District’s needs. She pledges to organize a “Northwest Council,” similar to the Bearden Council, within her first 30 days in office “so we can get our priorities straight and speak with one voice.”

Highlighting the weak national economy, Holman says he wants the city to seize on the potential of partnerships with institutional neighbors such as Oak Ridge National Laboratory and the University of Tennessee to benefit the local tax base.

“We ought to be positioned to take advantage of as much as we can,” he said. “I’ve seen the American enterprise system working at peak performance. I’m not saying it’s easy ... but I’ve watched the process work real well most of my career.”

Palmer highlights her analytical approach while working on advisory councils to set school-level budgets in Florida, where she was named one of the top 100 best-practices teachers in the state in 2000.

“I have learned to work with groups that are polar opposites,” she said, “to work together and bring an amenable solution.”

Palmer said that experience would carry over in fostering early discussions between neighborhood groups and builders, or homeless housing developers.

“I do not want surprises on City Council,” Palmer said. “Everybody works best when everybody knows the whole game plan.”

Both of the candidates also spoke to the importance of transparency. Holman said government officials have earned the cynicism of too many people. And Palmer said she’s an independent candidate who would not be a puppet vote for special interests.

4th District:

Police officers or codes enforcement workers?

While all of the candidates acknowledge the tough choices to be made over city services in the next budget cycle, both candidates for Northeast Knoxville’s 4th District seat have called for hiring more city personnel for the sake of neighborhoods.

Ray Abbas, 35, proposed an 80-officer increase over the next three years in the

ranks of the Knoxville Police Department, which in recent years has fallen just short of its authorized force level of 416 uniformed officers.

Without offering specific cost estimates or potential funding sources, Abbas said the expansion would pay dividends in stepped-up enforcement against traffic offenders, petty crimes and, in the case of the 4th District, persistent problems with prostitution.

“It’s certainly overdue,” said Abbas, who received the endorsement of the local chapter of the Fraternal Order of Police. “Whenever you’re looking at adding money to a budget, it’s all about priorities. It is an expense that is an investment ... in the protection of our neighborhoods.”

Nick Della Volpe, 61, questions whether it’s a long-term cost the city can afford. Instead, he advocates a concentrated outreach effort to build cooperation between officers and citizens.

“I think the biggest single gain we can make is ... getting rid of the ‘us versus them’ mindset,” said Della Volpe, who’s currently enrolled in KPD’s citizens police academy. “You can never hire the number of eyes and ears you need.”

Yet Della Volpe has called for a modest increase in the number of codes enforcement officers to handle the backlog of neighborhood complaints over neglected properties. He said the idea, however, could be incorporated into a larger cost-savings push to combine such services between Knoxville and Knox County government.

“It all comes back to money — where do you get the budget when everyone needs more?” Della Volpe said. “Sometimes a solution exists that’s not on the table right now.”

Abbas, an employment coordinator for the Salvation Army, also pledged to resign and seek another day job, if elected, to avoid any perceived conflict of interest; the organization receives private fundraising through the 10-Year plan. And he also has offered, if elected, to defer his City Council salary to the city’s office of Neighborhoods.

Della Volpe, who is winding down his career law practice and has more than 30 years service with various neighborhood organizations and city advisory boards, said he would be a full-time councilman.

6th District:

Creating jobs,

cleaning up blights

After years as a local election poll worker, candidate Daniel Brown has put his own name on the ballot, while minister and entrepreneur Charles Frazier is making

another bid for office after previous runs for County Commission and the state Legislature.

Brown, 63, calls for an expanded focus on small business development and job training to address long-standing employment needs in East Knoxville, although he acknowledges the priority as one City Council cannot address alone.

“Council people just have to work with other agencies to help,” said Brown, who’s also retired from the U.S. Postal Service.

He also wants to continue encouraging signs, such as the recent Magnolia Avenue Corridor plan, which includes a draft form-based zoning code similar to that of the South Waterfront, designed to set the stage for new mixed-use commercial and residential development.

Similarly, Brown said he would like to see the use of business incentives such as tax-increment financing, which has been the tool of choice in Mayor Bill Haslam’s focus on downtown redevelopment, re-focused in surrounding center-city areas.

Frazier, an associate pastor with New Friendship Baptist Church who said last week he is now dissolving his cash-advance business in Five Points, emphasizes a safer, cleaner 6th District that residents can take pride in.

“We all want a safe community, we all want a better economy,” said Frazier, 54. “What people want (most) is their needs addressed.”

Frazier calls for action on the more than 700 abandoned or blighted lots in the district and for renewed efforts to attract new businesses to the east side.

The specifics of any agenda in office, though, should be shaped largely by regular community meetings to listen to the district’s specific needs, said Frazier, who also has worked extensively as a director and producer in public television.

“We need to not set so much of an agenda, but to listen to people’s concerns,” he said. “The most important element of being a City Council member is voting the concerns of the community.”

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