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City Council candidates get jump on political season

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** Challengers and incumbents discuss their 2007 campaigns.*

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For those who love politics, fall marks the most wonderful time of the year.

In Columbus, such political junkies could get their fix at a forum for City Council candidates hosted by the Clintonville Area Chamber of Commerce Tuesday, Sept. 11, at the North Broadway United Methodist Church.

The forum drew all but two of those seeking to obtain or retain a seat on city council, save Council President Michael Mentel, a Democrat, and Larry Thomas, a Republican. They were unable to attend because of medical issues, said Joe Patchen, vice chairman for governmental affairs for the chamber. He served as the forum's emcee.

Thomas' wife, Isabella Thomas, spoke at the forum in his stead.

Of the eight candidates vying for office, the top four vote-getters will receive a seat on council.

Another pair of candidates -- incumbent Democrat Priscilla Tyson and challenger Heidi Samuel -- will face each other in a head-to-head contest. They sat in the audience and will have their own debate at the chamber's Oct. 25 luncheon, Patchen said.

Tyson, who replaced former Councilwoman Mary Jo Hudson after Hudson left office earlier this year to become director of the Ohio Department of Insurance, faces a separate race for re-election because Hudson's term was not scheduled to expire until 2009.

For two hours, candidates took written questions from the audience and from Patchen. A sampling of what they had to say:

Republican Paul Bingle, on budget concerns: During the coming years, the community will have to ask itself how it can address the "unlimited number of ideas and appeals" from community members with a budget that essentially has seen growing expenses and flat revenue, he said.

A choice will have to be made between keeping the current tax rate -- and with it, old and aging equipment, already short-staffed departments -- and raising taxes for improvements, he said.

"I'm telling you, it is a reality we have to face," Bingle said.

Republican Bill Brownson, on the effectiveness a Republican could have on a Democrat-controlled city council: "The last thing you need is another 'Yes' man or yes woman," he said.

His model, said Brownson, would be former Councilwoman Jeannette Bradley, herself a Republican who eventually became lieutenant governor. She worked hand-in-hand with her council colleagues, but "from time to time ... spoke out in a way inconsistent with the balance of council," creating a conversation that resulted in improved decisions.

Democrat incumbent Hearcel Craig, on the biggest challenge facing the community: "Education is a tremendous challenge," he said.

The public schools, and the Columbus City School District in particular, are making "important and incremental gains ... they're not where we want them to be, but I think the growth (in test scores) is

important," he said.

In addition, council is committed to public safety and to job growth and economic development, which generate funding for city services, said Craig.

Democrat Incumbent Andrew Ginther, on giving aid to small businesses: "I think infrastructure is a big part of how city government can help small businesses," he said.

Responsive city services, and placing as small as possible tax burden on businesses, also helps, as does partnering with local school districts to make sure businesses can find good employees within their ranks, he said.

In the next 30-50 years, "nothing will be more important" than having access to a pool of young professionals, said Ginther.

"There is going to be a huge shortage in this country for skilled workers."

Republican Jim O'Grady, on safety concerns: "I think we need to focus on policing," he said.

A Northland area native who now lives in the Polaris area, O'Grady served as a court bailiff while he put himself through college and law school, eventually becoming an assistant prosecuting attorney in the juvenile division.

"We need to provide for our safety, as well as for fire and trash services," he said.

Democrat Incumbent Charleta Tavares, on attracting and retaining young professionals: Columbus is pursuing attracting and retaining young professionals in part by hiring consultant Rebecca Ryan, who has helped provide direction on how that work can best be accomplished, she said.

"We want to ensure that we have an inviting community that has addressed the issues that young professionals are concerned about," she said.

The city also is working to support the development of housing Downtown that would sell for \$200,000 or less, as well as has partnered with the Columbus Chamber to develop an internship portal linking local college students and prospective employers, Tavares said.

Mrs. Thomas, speaking on behalf of her husband, Republican Larry Thomas, on crime committed by young people: The rising juvenile crime rate and the increasingly young age at which children commit crimes is a concern for the Thomases, both lawyers, said Mrs. Thomas.

Presently, she said, children are warehoused, not treated, when they are incarcerated, and more focus on rehabilitating them is necessary.

"If we don't, as a community and as a city, make investing in our youth a priority ... we will never have enough police, and quite frankly, if that takes taxes, that has to happen," said Mrs. Thomas.

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