

Back for Round 2 - School, sheriff, commissioner candidates face off

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The second night of candidate conversations included talk of keeping the Confederate monument in place, the possibility of law enforcement body cameras and keeping online programs in county schools.

Unlike Tuesday, all candidates were in attendance for the final night of online forums co-hosted by the Palatka Daily News and St. Johns River State College.

The first debate included candidates for Putnam County Board of Commissioners District 3, no-party affiliate Douglas Hays, Democrat Joshua Mast and Republican incumbent Terry Turner.

A source of local dispute has been whether to remove the Confederate statue at the Putnam County Courthouse. Candidates gave diverse opinions on how they would have handled the issue.

Hays, a Satsuma resident, said he would put an issue such as the monument on a ballot for residents to vote on the matter.

“There are people that have generations that have been here. And that statue is a remembrance of the legacy of their forefathers, and they have no say in the matter,” Hays said. “As far as I’m concerned, it’s their statue. They should at least have some say-so as to where it gets moved.”

Mast thought most issues with the statue could have been handled privately, saying the extensive talk continues perpetuates anger and divisiveness.

Turner was one of four commissioners who voted in favor of relocating the monument once private funds are allocated. The board also voted to establish the Statue Relocation Selection Committee, which will recommend a new location.

His tune to move the monument could be changing, however. He believed residents were more upset the board “laid down” to two young Black Lives Matter movement leaders.

“We just had no idea that a big portion of the community would take it personally that we were going to move the statue,” Turner said. “With all the fallout, I think that it just might be time to say, ‘Looks pretty good where it is right now.’”

Commissioner candidates agreed more attention should be paid to county Emergency Services. Animal Services improvements were a talking point for Mast and Hays when focusing on bettering Putnam County.

The candidates also discussed the handling the coronavirus pandemic.

Hays favored the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act but questioned why the board needed to hire a consultant for \$50,000 and why the amount of money distributed per recipient was not set at the highest amount possible.

Mast took a general approach of the pandemic and suggested listening to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention officials because coronavirus is unprecedented.

“It’s unfortunate that this has become such a politicized issue. I mean, we’re talking about the health of citizens, and people’s rights end where mine begin,” Mast said. “Mr. Turner talks about masks and recommending CDC guidelines as a leader but is photographed on social media wearing no masks, shaking hands, no social distancing.”

The second portion of Wednesday’s forum included Republican Putnam County Sheriff Gator DeLoach and no-party affiliation opponent Edison Edison.

Topics of community involvement, employee retention and candidate qualifications drove the conversations. Edison said his goals, if becoming sheriff, would be starting a civilian review board, mandating body cameras and starting mental health training for officers.

DeLoach also advocated for mental health training but said he would focus on employee retention. As for body cameras, he is not in favor of mandating them.

“I’ll tell you very candidly, there’s a lot of mixed opinions on body cameras and their usefulness. I see them as a tool. I don’t see them as a be-all, end-all,” DeLoach said. “My personal opinion is that while body cameras are a tool and they serve a purpose, I would entertain putting body cameras on our deputies when every convicted felon who has been convicted of a violent crime is forced to wear a body camera here.”

Candidates were asked what changes should be made to the Sheriff’s Office budget in light of the coronavirus pandemic. DeLoach said he would work closely with the Board of County Commissioners, which approves the agency’s funding.

He said he was proud of what his office has done with what they have and especially proud local crime has dropped 37% over three years.

On the other hand, Edison said the budget of the department he hopes to lead was not on his mind. Instead, he addressed the coronavirus pandemic.

“As (for) the budget, I’m not interested because I’m not in there. ... Even though it’s public record, some of it, I don’t know what department is doing it,” Edison said. “You’re being doped. The whole United States is being doped with this (influenza). You need to wake up. ... Our constitutional rights are being violated.”

When given the chance to ask his opponent a question, Edison inquired why the sheriff never returned his call a little more than a month after DeLoach was elected nearly four years ago.

“Frankly, I never recall receiving that call,” DeLoach said. “I’ll tell you that I made a solemn promise to the voters of Putnam County and that’s that I would not change my phone number whenever I got elected. And I have kept that promise.”

DeLoach chose to ask Edison what his qualifications were to run for sheriff because Edison does not have law enforcement experience. Edison said he has prior administrative experience that will help him being a leader.

“First of all, the Bill of Rights gives me that qualification,” Edison said. “I’m going to hire another sheriff. I’ve got this already set up. Of course, I can’t sit on here and tell you names ... (but) they’ve already got experience. Two sheriffs.”

The Putnam County superintendent discussion closed the forum with Republican incumbent Rick Surrency running to keep his seat against Democratic challenger Pamela Brown. The candidates agreed with each other on several policies, including pursuing arts, science and math programs to stimulate students.

On the topic of student learning during the coronavirus pandemic, the candidates said they were concerned about the quality of education students are receiving.

“We try to be very creative to make sure kids are getting quality education from a certified teacher,” Surrency said. “Nothing replaces that face-to-face instruction, but we’re doing the best we can under the circumstances. And we will encourage parents and students to eventually come back to the face-to-face as time permits.”

Both candidates said student safety is important considering the two times this calendar year when a student took a gun to school. They said working to fill social and emotional needs is important when educating students and giving them proper resources.

While many county systems will face budget cuts in the upcoming year because of the virus pandemic, Surrency said every school district in the state is concerned and he has already started to look at how to handle the cuts.

Brown said she wanted to make sure budgets were where “they needed to be” and look for other ways, such as money from federal programs, to fund schools.

“I am hoping that when the Census numbers are completed, that money will be funneled down to our district,” Brown said. “I’m not against even taking a pay cut as superintendent to make sure that the funds are there to do what we need to do for all our teachers, students and staff in the school district.”

The Tuesday’s and Wednesday’s forums were live-streamed because of COVID concerns. Recordings of both forums can be found at PalatkaDailyNews.com, on the PDN Facebook page and on SJR State’s YouTube page.

Election Day is Nov. 3, and early voting will be 8:30 a.m. – 6 p.m. Oct. 19-31 in Crescent City, Interlachen and Palatka. For election information, visit soe.putnam-fl.com.

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