

Candidates forum informs the public

February 14, 2020



Church and state were not so separate at the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors forum held by True North Organizing Network on Monday night, Feb. 10.

Within the stone walls and stained glass windows of the United Methodist Church in Crescent City, the seven candidates sat in front of the filled church pews, ready to inform the public on their stances.

"I care about what happens in Crescent City. I want to stay here and invest my life and my talent, so the people who govern this city matter to me," said Sarah Elston, a teacher who attended the forum.

Pastor Dana Port orchestrated the amicable forum in which community members stepped forward to ask four previously agreed upon questions and one audience question selected that night. Each candidate was given the opportunity to answer the question.

The question which issued the most concrete responses from the candidates was that of ending homelessness. The question, "What would you do as a county supervisor to end homelessness in Del Norte County?" was answered in the following ways:

District 5 candidates:

Incumbent Bob Berkowitz emphasized getting those who live on the streets and suffer mental illness into a 24-hour shelter with services. He suggested turning Crescent City's chapter of Our Daily Bread Ministries, a religious-based food bank and recovery service, into a full-time facility to provide shelter and services.

Kevin Hendrick discussed the need for affordable housing, stating high rent can contribute to homelessness. He had multiple options he endorsed, such as reducing fees and simplifying permitting for auxiliary housing units to be built on existing properties.

District 1 candidates:

"First off it's not the homeless issue. It's the homeless issues. It's a multitude of issues," said John Pritchett.

He went on to talk about giving law enforcement the tools to take on property crime and illegal squatting, while working on state funding and public and private partnerships to help the homeless. He emphasized that homelessness is not a crime, pointing specifically to the 150 homeless Del Norte Unified School District (DNUSD) students.

Darrin Short agreed that homelessness is a multifaceted problem, and stated his support for True North's Hope Village Tiny House Program, a transitional housing solution. He pointed out that Grants Pass is receiving a Hope Village this year.

"It's a proven program, and I believe that we can achieve that in our community," he said. "I know of one landowner in the city who would like to donate land to this cause, and I would like to see it come to fruition."

District 2 candidates:

James Ramsey is convinced that a supervisor's work takes partnerships, and he stated homelessness is an area that requires partnerships with all kinds of people. An instrumental figure in Daily Bread Ministries for 14 years, he promised as supervisor to support all of the homeless-solving initiatives.

Incumbent Lori Cowan said she has been working on the homeless issue since before she was a supervisor. As supervisor she worked to bring state funds for homelessness to the county, but that it has taken a long time. While she waited, she partnered with Mission Possible to bring Crescent City a full-time shelter with showers and twice-weekly mental health services in 2020.

Valerie Starkey believes in moving long-term homeless individuals with mental illness or substance abuse into subsidized housing and then linking them with supportive services.

"We do need to get away from a "one-size fits all approach" and spend time on the front end, identifying the reason for their particular homelessness," she said. "How we respond to someone who lost their job should – and will – be different from someone who has untreated mental health."

The final question of the forum was the supervisor's vision for youth in the community and opportunities for them.

District 5 candidates:

Hendrick focused heavily on bettering education for early childhood and adding more vocational training options in the county, but he ultimately brought his answer back to one of the keys of his platform — developing affordable housing, especially for homeless youth.

Incumbent Berkowitz believes children need more recreational areas, especially in the Klamath area. He discussed how throughout his term, he has worked with Yurok Tribal officials to transfer recreational areas to the Yurok Tribe, as they could get more federal and state funding to renovate it.

District 5 candidates:

Short wants to focus on vocational training in the high schools, training he remembers receiving when he was growing up in Crescent City.

“We all know this is a wonderful place to live, but since that time, we’ve lost some opportunities at the high school and that is with vocations, so my dream for the youth here is the ability to get a comprehensive education,” he said.

Pritchett praised the recreation department for the programs it offers to children, and expressed his desire to bring even more recreational programs and after school activities. Since those require funds, he shared his vision of hosting sports tournaments nearly every weekend, attracting visitors who will then invest in the economy.

District 2 candidates:

Starkey worked as a probation officer, so she is passionate about providing support to at-risk youth. Additionally, she expressed her support for early childhood education and working with the high school and junior college to increase certificate programs. She hopes to bring in a program where high school students can be introduced to various career sectors in the community.

Having worked as an elementary school teacher in the county, Ramsey expressed his passion for early childhood education services and reducing the cost of childcare. Additionally, he would like to see more businesses that cater to youth, such as a pizza parlor and a coffee house with open mic nights.

Incumbent Cowan focused on keeping youth busy and involved in activities. She described her support of the recreation department’s youth basketball program and added that she and her husband host a youth surf camp over the summer.

“Youth is my heart I raised for children here, and yes, we got to keep them busy,” she said. “I’m a strong believer in keeping our kids active and supporting any program that does that.”

Other question topics included small business development, mental health services and bringing people to and retaining them in the county. In an orderly fashion, with very little contention between candidates, the forum lasted roughly an hour and a half, giving each candidate a chance to present their campaign.

“I wanted to make sure that I was very clear about what all of the candidates felt about the issues that we were facing,” said Charlene Knowlton, Candidate Starkey’s sister. “I know that it’s important to stay informed because the board of supervisors is a non-partisan group that is advocating for all of us.”

The California primary is set for March 3.

To read more on each candidate’s backstory, campaign and future plans, read the Triplicate’s 500 word candidate feature articles at www.triplicate.com/ by searching “candidate” in the search bar.