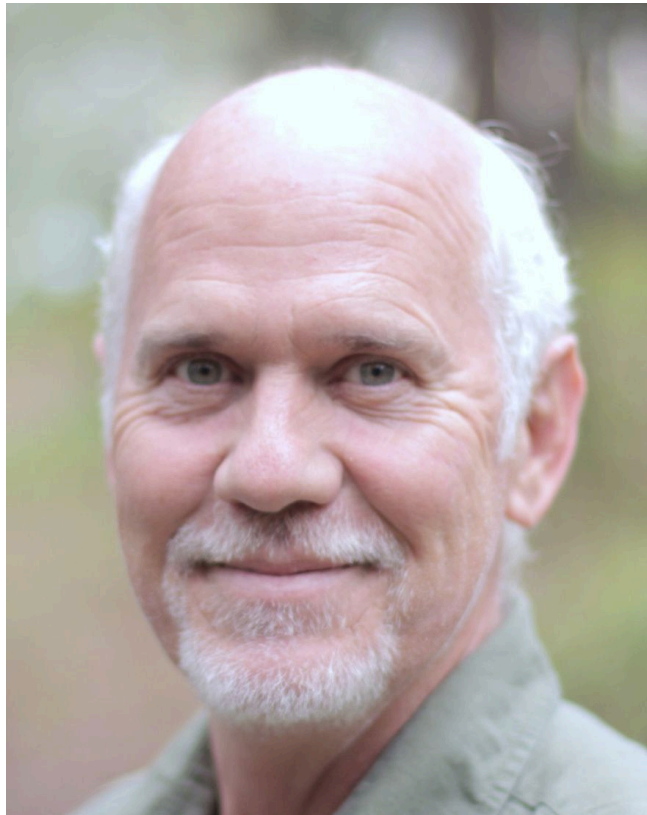

View from the Left: The Notable Empty Chair

October 24, 2022



Last Wednesday, I attended the candidate forum for School Board and County Supervisor sponsored by the Del Norte Realtors Association. It was informative to watch these candidates field questions about important local issues. However, what was most notable was the empty chair.

There is nothing comparable to seeing a candidate in a live forum to help evaluate a candidate's knowledge and character. It is a test of what they must do if they are elected; face the public, answer difficult questions and maintain decorum. A voter can learn more about a candidate in an open forum than all the postcards, ads and yard signs combined.

All four school board candidates were in attendance: William Meriwether and Abbie Crist who are running for School Board in the 2nd District; and Phillip Williams and Michael Greer who are running for School Board in the 5th District. Only voters in these districts can vote for these candidates. Nevertheless, the outcome of this election will add two new school board members and will define the character of the school board.

This panel was excellent to watch. All the candidates respectfully interacted with each other in a thoughtful conversation about education issues. It was instructive to hear them outline their views and goals. It appears that all of them would be qualified to serve on the school board.

In a surprising twist to the 2nd District race, Will Meriwether is conceding that Abbie Crist is the most qualified candidate for the 2nd District. This is an uncommon demonstration of commitment to the greater good. Will is recommending Phillip Williams for District 5 and Abbie Crist for District 2 because of their deep local roots and dedication to our community.

Before the School Board candidates, the forum began with the Supervisor candidates. There was Supervisor Susan Masten, Dean Wilson, Patty Adams and an empty chair. The sponsors provided no explanation why there was an empty chair instead of a candidate. It left me to wonder why a serious candidate would not participate in this event.

On the prior night, the True North Organizing Network invited all the School Board and Supervisor candidates to a virtual forum which was broadcast online. I was told by a True North organizer that the absent candidate also did not attend their event. He had a “prior engagement.”

I asked the Realtors Association organizer why the missing candidate did not come to their event. She said that they left a voice mail, texted, and sent emails, but did not receive a response. She observed that this “does not instill confidence.”

Not showing up is disrespectful to the voters who tuned in to learn more about the candidates. It makes me question their commitment to attend the many meetings that are required of a County Supervisor. Showing up is a low bar but remember the old saying that the world is run by the people that show up.

The three Supervisor candidates that were present answered questions and illuminated their positions on issues.

I was dismayed by some of the uncompassionate answers from Wilson regarding social issues. When Wilson stated that being homeless is a “life choice,” it occurred to me that during his 35 years as a law enforcement officer, he mostly met troublesome homeless people when responding to 911 calls. This could skew his view since he primarily interacted with the “problem” homeless people. But there are also veterans, seniors, children, and families that are homeless and not by choice, but rather by circumstances beyond their control.

A career in law enforcement may produce a particular set of skills that do not necessarily provide the experience, qualifications, and temperament to effectively address complex social and economic issues as a County Supervisor.

In contrast, I am impressed with Supervisor Masten’s broad knowledge and experience in business, economic development, and public service. Her answers reflected her commitment to represent people over politics. She clearly cares about our community and will represent all the people who live here.

Patty Adams also did well and seems like a reasonable choice for Supervisor. As I watched Sue Masten and Patty Adams interact, I imagined how different the Board of Supervisors would be if we had three intelligent and articulate women Supervisors. I have watched Supervisors Masten and Starkey work effectively together and I think Patty Adams would complement this fresh approach to good governance.

As the leader of the local Democratic Party, I cannot endorse Patty Adams, a Republican, without running afoul of party rules. However, I live in the 4th District and there is no Democrat running, so I must decide which of the two Republicans to vote for.

It would have been helpful to compare both District 4 candidates side by side, but in the end the absence of one of the candidates was the deciding factor. If I must choose between an empty chair or the candidate that shows up, I will vote for the one that shows up.

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