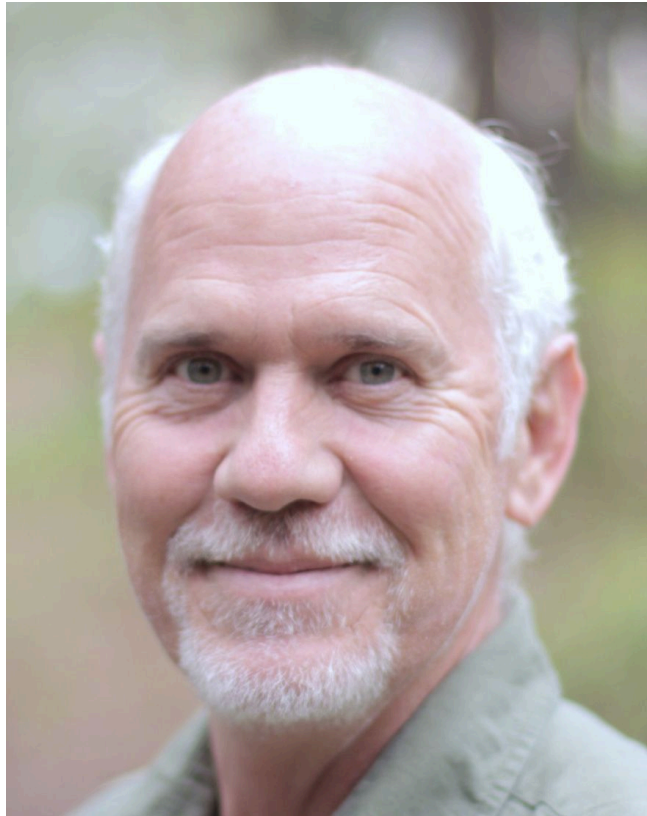


In My View: Del Norte County Candidate's Forum

February 11, 2024



The Del Norte Association of Realtors sponsored a local candidates forum on January 26 which featured all five candidates for Del Norte County Supervisor. These forums are helpful to compare the candidates side by side.

Candidates were asked questions about topics related to living wage jobs, mental health, Tri-Agency, offshore wind, Proposition 1, cannabis tax, housing, and homelessness. The questions were not provided in advance, so the answers were based on what was in their head. Some did better than others.

Each candidate could respond to what another said, and this kept the dialogue engaging. I will highlight a few details that might help illuminate what motivates each of these candidates.

Second District

Two candidates are competing for this position, Valerie Starkey and Rivers Drown. One will win on March 5.

Rivers Drown

Rivers Drown said his highest priority would be to form a drug task force to combat the opioid epidemic and stamp out the associated drug crimes. He reiterated this goal several times but did not offer any other plans. Opioid addiction is an important issue but not the only issue.

Drown worked at Pelican Bay State Prison for 25 years until he retired last year. Much like Dean Wilson, Drown had long term employment in a well-paid, government job. Coming from this position of affluence, they both seem to lack empathy for residents who struggle with poverty and behavioral health challenges.

When asked about a living wage, Drown blithely explained that minimum wage is for entry level jobs and workers should find higher paying jobs if they want more money. This is little comfort to people working minimum wage jobs if there are no other jobs for them.

Valerie Starkey

Valerie Starkey was the superstar of this show. She answered the questions with examples of specific results and proposals that address the issues. As an incumbent Supervisor she demonstrated a deep understanding of current issues. For her, it is all about results.

In 2022, Starkey spearheaded the formation of a County committee to find solutions for local homelessness. This partnership led to Del Norte County receiving a \$10.8 million grant to support an emergency shelter, construct 50 small transitional housing units and provide supportive services.

As a member of the County Behavioral Health Advisory Board, Starkey has improved local behavioral health services. Starkey worked with Sheriff Scott and others to implement a mobile crisis response team, starting in July, which will help people in crisis get the care they need while avoiding the emergency room or jail.

Valerie Starkey works hard every day for her constituents and has a proven record of results. She has earned a second term as County Supervisor.

Fifth District

Three candidates are competing for this position, Dean Wilson, Linda Sutter, and Heather Polen. If no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the vote on March 5, the top two will runoff in November.

Dean Wilson

Dean Wilson stated his highest priority is to develop a strategic plan. This is a surprisingly bureaucratic objective. The County has a Comprehensive Economic Development Strategic Plan that identifies projects to work on and a housing plan which sets goals for more housing. We don't need another plan. We need to act on the plans we have.

Wilson supports services for the homeless, because current law will not allow a sweep of homeless camps unless you offer shelter. The courts have found it to be cruel and unusual punishment to roust a homeless person if they have no other place to sleep. Wilson says once shelter is offered a camp can be dismantled.

Wilson said that he is opposed to offshore wind but that the Board should be engaged. Wilson has said this before, but this time Polen had the spunk to call him out on his misstatement. Wilson recently voted to prohibit Tri-Agency from any involvement with offshore wind.

Linda Sutter

Linda Sutter is an award-winning anti-tax crusader. She opposed the sales tax which is currently funding city and county services. Two years later she tried unsuccessfully to repeal this tax. She won an award last year from the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association for this effort.

Sutter supports a reduction in the cannabis tax and a tax exemption for new businesses that locate here. She is opposed to offshore wind, Proposition 1, the Tri-Agency and Dean Wilson. She accused Wilson of voting against the interests of his constituents and criticized his opposition to public workshops on the County budget.

Sutter is a persistent advocate for transparent government and open public decision making. Sometimes her criticisms are justified, but I don't always agree with her tactics. Last year, she filed suit against the City, County and Harbor over numerous allegations related to the operation of Tri-Agency.

Heather Polen

Heather Polen is the fresh face in this race. She had obviously done her homework and had strong answers to the questions. When asked to identify her top priorities she went straight to the bottom line.

Polen identified roads, homelessness, affordable housing, education, and crumbling infrastructure as concerns. Then she stated that to tackle these issues we need to have an open, transparent budget with community participation. She said, "The community needs to decide what our priorities are."

Polen is not a fan of offshore wind, but recognizes that the federal government is going to "stick them out there" and it will affect us. Polen said, "The only option we have as a community is to participate in those negotiations, to study this issue, to be the most informed people at that table and do everything in our power to mitigate that risk and capture every dang dollar we can to benefit our community."

This is a nuanced position that demonstrates a policy sophistication that is uncommon from a new Supervisor. I believe that Heather Polen would make a good, smart, and caring Supervisor.

Just My Opinion

I recommend Valerie Starkey and Heather Polen for County Supervisor. They are both qualified and together they would help steer our county in a better direction.

Note:

The views expressed are mine and do not represent the opinion of the Triplicate or the Democratic Party.

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