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## 13 seek 5 seats to have say on how Davidson grows

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Unchecked growth and development, fiscal responsibility and community involvement are the hot topics in the race of a dozen candidates seeking a term on the nonpartisan, five-seat town Board of Commissioners.

Save Davidson held a forum this month that featured 12 of the 13 Board of Commissioners candidates running for office.

Board of Commissioner incumbents Stacey Anderson, Jim Fuller and Rodney Graham face challengers Michael Angell, George Berger, Jane Campbell, Shana Erber, Ryan Fay, Matthew Fort, Autumn Michael, David Sitton, Sam Weaver and Troy A. Taylor on the election ballot Nov. 7. Taylor did not attend the forum held at the Gethsemane Baptist Church.

Commissioners Beth Cashion, first elected in 2013, and Brian Jenest, first elected in 2007, opted not to run for re-election.

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Save Davidson has a mission statement of striving to ensure fairness, ethics and transparency in official Town of Davidson decision-making through citizen education, empowerment and participation, according to the community group.

Save Davidson held a mayoral forum Sept. 14 where current mayor John Woods and challengers Laurie Venzon and Rusty Knox discussed much of the same subjects important to Davidson residents.

During the board of commissioners forum Sept. 18, four candidates each answered a question posed by moderator Andrew O'Geen, a political science professor of American history at Davidson College, who then asked the next group of four candidates a different question.

Many residents feel the pace of residential and commercial growth is not only outstripping the town's infrastructure and resources but also changing the identity of Davidson's close-knit community.

O'Geen said there are currently 15 development projects in Davidson that have recently been approved or are being considered for approval totaling 1,952 residential units, 472,000 square feet of commercial space and 215 hotel rooms.

“I think most of us here tonight would agree that we all moved to Davidson because of its small town charm,” said Fort. “Today I believe Davidson truly is a unique and special place to live. But our current growth trajectory is putting that at risk and we need to come up with a more balanced growth plan.”

Michael said she believed the town is not currently managing growth if managed growth met her definition as “growth driven by the town, driven by the community need and community desire, rather than driven by the developer,” Michael said.

Sitton and Weaver both said they would update planning ordinances and the town’s comprehensive plan to lower the density levels for future housing projects to help manage growth.

“Everybody talks about small-town feel, right?” said Weaver. “About Davidson. This is what drove everybody to this town. They want to keep Davidson a small town, right? It comes back to what does a small town mean? Is it multi-family homes? Apartments? When I think about small town, I don’t think about apartments. I don’t think about the development of Potts Street with 276 apartments and 19 town homes. I don’t view that as small town.”

If elected, Berger said he would like to bring back the development review process that was streamlined many years ago to encourage development after the recession.

As a result, projects now move much too fast and the process lacks the transparency it once had, Berger said.

“Honestly I think that was one of the worst things the town of Davidson could have done,” said Berger. “I think that’s led us where we are now.”

Graham said he voted against streamlining the development review process, which took the Board of Commissioners out of the approval process for most developments, in 2012 and would do so again today.

“I think the development review process needs to be thorough and challenging and difficult and not easy,” Graham said.

One of these development projects many residents in Davidson are opposed to is the proposed Luminous project on 19 acres of town-owned land on Beaty Street. The project is set to include up to 138 residential units, a 135-room hotel, 28,000 square-feet of commercial space and a seven acre-park with a pond, gazebo and walking trails.

But Save Davidson members and others have argued the land's original owner sold the property to the town with the designation the land be used as a park.

Another complaint is that town government did not consult the public prior to deciding the use of the land.

"I thought the process was flawed," said Campbell. "I think there is a need for preservation especially on public land. I think people in this town should be a driving force in how decisions are made."

Anderson, who has served as a commissioner since 2013, said there were many flaws with the Luminous project and that it should probably be started over.

Anderson encouraged residents to vote for two upcoming general obligation bond proposals together totaling \$9 million on the Nov. 7 ballot that would provide money for the development of parks, greenways and open space if the public is interested in turning the Beaty Street property into a park.

"This is your opportunity to give us a lot of feedback," Anderson said.

A third \$6 million bond on the ballot would pay for road improvements if approved Nov. 7.

Fuller, who has served as a commissioner since 2011, suggested town government put plans for Beaty Street "on mothballs" for one year and appoint a citizen task force to best decide the use of the land.

"I'm going to do something unusual," said Fuller. "We made a mistake, and I admit I was part of it by voting to move forward without having a public hearing on what to do with that land. But we can cure the mistake and that's what I'm proposing we do tonight."

Fiscal responsibility was also an important issue addressed at the forum as the town of Davidson continues to subsidize an annual debt service for MI-Connection, a cable and Internet system servicing Davidson, Cornelius and Mooresville.

Meanwhile, the current Board of Commissioners has also agreed to move forward with a \$13 million plan to renovate Town Hall to provide more space for government employees and fire and police personnel.

O'Geen asked the candidates how they would as a commissioner balance the need implied by these three proposed general obligation bonds with a similar need to be fiscally responsible to tax-paying citizens.

Erber said she was in support of police and fire personnel, however, with strains on the town's finances due to MI-Connection, she would re-examine the town hall renovation project to see what kind of creative options can we come up with to make sure "we're aren't spending beyond our means in this critical time."

Fay agreed.

"This is really the situation MI-Connection has put us in," Fay said. "You're faced with making a lot of difficult decisions that you probably wouldn't have to if we weren't in this situation. That needs to be addressed immediately. With regards to a new town hall, I'm not a proponent of that right now."

Instead, Fay suggested renovating the town hall to house emergency services and then finding other office space for government offices.

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