

Transparency

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was important to listen to the people of Cape May, take a step back and see what is needed for the city.

Meier said he would not seek help from outside the city in designing or planning the town.

"I ask for your input, that's number one," Meier said. "This is our town, and we should decide how we want our town to look and how our future should be."

Pessagno said if something is out to bid and "our local people can do it," that would be "magnificent." She said she wasn't opposed to looking outside the city if a local firm does not have the ability to do handle the project.

"The problems with these plans, though, once they are completed, they become a New York highway," Van de Vaarst said. "Their fun to build but nobody maintains them, they just sit on a shelf and collect dust."

He said the city's master plan includes a number of projects that would be beneficial to implement. Hendricks said it is strange in New Jersey that professional service contracts can be issued on a no-bid basis. He said three studies from Temple University for city projects produced "shaky" results. Hendricks said professional service contracts in the city are not properly monitored.

Public information

The candidates were asked

of their assessment of how well the city keeps residents informed on city business, audits and financial statements, minutes and agendas and current salaries of personnel.

Meier said the city's website is out of date and residents should not have to fill out Open Public Records Act forms to obtain information.

Van de Vaarst said overall, council does a good job of responding to citizens' questions during the public comment portion of meeting but did not always give a complete answer. He concurred the city website should be improved but asked how many resources is council willing to dedicate to the cost of upgrading the site. Van de Vaarst asked if there were city staffers who could improve the website.

Pessagno said meeting minutes are not always available in a timely manner because each council member must physically sign off on the documents. She said Cape May Convention Hall's website needs improvement.

Hendricks said a lot of work is put on the city clerk when the public requests documents. He said it would be much easier if PDFs were available that could be easily uploaded. Inderwies called the city's website very antiquated. He noted he is still listed as fire chief following his retirement.

"There is very little city oversight of the website," Inderwies said. "I do agree that salaries, contracts, wages, request for proposals, everything should be on the website."

Convention Hall finances

Candidates were asked what they would do about Convention Hall having no transparent operating budget or business plan.

"Convention Hall was born in contention and still remains that way," Pessagno said, adding that all the financial information on the facility should be available to the public. Pessagno said the hall's potential should be maximized by restructuring the way the facility is being managed or by hiring an executive director.

"It's a city-owned property and the records should be opened," Van de Vaarst said. "What's the profit? What's the loss? Is the Convention Hall bringing in income or is it losing money?"

He said there should be fiscal accountability for the building. Van de Vaarst said the city does not do a good job marketing events.

Hendricks said there was no driving force behind the hall other than the mayor and city manager.

"There's no profit and loss statement, and the reason for that is very simple. They're not making a profit," he said.

Hendricks asked if the building was a convention hall or a community center. He said convention centers may have two or three football field-sized parking lots.

Inderwies said no figures have been given on this year's Seafood Festival because there are no reports at council meetings. He said he asked at a

recent council meeting if an executive director would be hired for Convention Hall and was told there were no plans for such a position.

"Why will there not be a director of a \$10.5 million facility that the residents of this town paid for with public money?" asked Inderwies. "City government needs to be more open about how they deal with the citizens and residents of Cape May."

Meier concurred with financial disclosure for Convention Hall and the need for an executive director that would also market the city. He said nonprofit organizations should have a fair opportunity to use the building at a reduced rate.

Project debt service

Candidates were asked if they agreed with the actions of mayor and council not including debt service for the Washington Street Mall reconstruction and Convention Hall as a part of the Tourism Utility budget, which placed the burden on property taxpayers.

Van de Vaarst said he did not believe the whole burden should be on taxpayers. He said he believed the Tourism Utility was an asset to the community. Van de Vaarst suggested the 2 percent room tax and mercantile license fees for whole house rentals be added to the Tourism Utility.

Hendricks said the utility consisted of Convention Hall, beach tags, lifeguards, all of which should have a balance sheet of profit and loss. He said the city was paying four times more than it should for flood insurance for Convention Hall because the building is sited too low.

Inderwies said there was no reason the Tourism Utility could not have line items like the Beach Utility.

Meier said the Tourism Utility should promote the city as a whole.

Pessagno said \$55,000 in sponsorships and advertising

helped support Convention Hall. She said 52 cents of every dollar comes from taxpayers in the city budget with 48 cents coming from other utilities. Pessagno endorsed expanding the Tourism Utility and marketing of the city to attract visitors.

Loss of federal aid

On the topic of Cape May Elementary School losing federal Impact Aid, Hendricks said the citizens of Cape May were funding a school that primarily supports the Coast Guard base.

Inderwies said he would work with local, state and federal government officials to come up with a solution.

Meier noted he attended Cape May Elementary School. He said he is a board member of the Taxpayers Association, which has met with U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo. Meier said LoBiondo informed the association "there is no money for schools." He said a merger between Cape May Elementary and West Cape May Elementary could be helpful in the future to decrease costs.

Pessagno said she met with LoBiondo, calling him a family friend.

"He assured me our Coast Guard base in not going to close in any of our lifetimes," she said. Pessagno said the problem with Impact Aid is the government is running out of money for the program. She said LoBiondo gave her his word he would work with the city to assist with the situation.

Van de Vaarst said the chairpersons of the appropriations committee and education department appropriations committee of the House of Representatives should be contacted to try and get the impact aid restored.

School district withdrawal

On a question about whether the Lower Cape May Regional School District funding formula was fair and do you agree

with Cape May's current plan, Inderwies said he wanted more information since much of the initiative has been handled in closed session with a special attorney.

Meier said he did not think the funding formula was unfair. He said he would follow the wishes of the voters on the issue.

Pessagno said Cape May needs at least one more member on the school board.

"My own feelings aside, I will absolutely execute the will of the people," she said.

Van de Vaarst said he would like to see Cape May Council meet with Lower Township Council to discuss a settlement agreement. He concurred with Pessagno that more members were needed on the school board from Cape May.

Hendricks concurred with Van de Vaarst on the idea of the councils of both towns meeting to discuss a settlement. He said he would focus on the expenditures of the regional school district such as union contracts.

Code enforcement

On a question of the enforcement of city codes and ordinances, Meier was critical of the city's Code Enforcement Department.

Pessagno suggested the city's ordinance regarding restaurant patios be enforced.

Van de Vaarst said ordinances such as one prohibiting dogs on the mall and prohibition of sandwich board signs are not enforced.

"The fines should be gradually increased so that people get the message very quickly," said Hendricks. He said code enforcement staff needed to be better deployed.

Inderwies said consistency in code enforcement was crucial. He noted the city hired a new employee in the department.

"It all comes down to the upper management of the city to see that these employees are first doing their job in enforcing the codes," he said.

House rental tax

On the topic of the approximately 11,000 whole-house rentals in Cape May not collecting the tourism tax as hotels and bed and breakfast inns are required to do, Pessagno suggested mercantile fees be increased for whole-house rentals in proportion to the size of the home.

Van de Vaarst concurred with Pessagno and suggested a stronger relationship with real estate agents to make sure each whole-house rental has a mercantile license.

Hendricks concurred with Van de Vaarst and Pessagno on the topic. Inderwies said the city should examine all its fees. He said whole-house rentals place a burden on police, EMS and fire services.

Meier said mercantile licenses should be evaluated every few years.

The election is Tuesday, Nov. 4.

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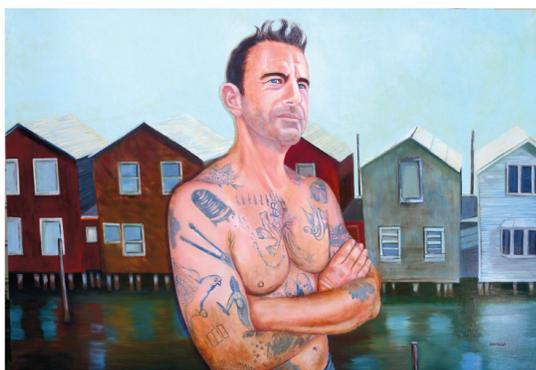
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