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Sandy Springs candidates debate

By Caroline Grey

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Sandy Springs District 1 City Council candidates spoke at a "Meet the Candidates" forum sponsored by the Sandy Springs Council of Neighborhoods Sunday evening. Hopefuls answered questions on issues including development, water management and quality of life issues.



As they prepared for Tuesday's election, the candidates - Elizabeth Huffner, Doug MacGinnitie, Mark Thomas and Vicki Willard - expressed a united front on many issues with differing outlooks on very few topics at Brandon Hall School.

"If the person elected can't convince three other people [on the City Council] they're right, then it doesn't matter," said candidate Doug MacGinnitie.

The candidates each were given the opportunity to make opening remarks before they were given a few moments each to address questions prepared by the moderator, Council of Neighborhoods President Larry Young.

Questions from Young ranged from asking candidates their top priorities for the next 12 months, if elected, what they thought the city's response should be to the current drought and their own critique of the city council up to this point.

Ms. Willard and MacGinnitie both expressed a desire for more sidewalks in Sandy Springs. She said she would like to see a net-work of sidewalks connecting the city like "a pearl necklace." He said while he has fond memories of walking to get ice cream as a child, those may be memories his own children may never have if the city does not change its current driving culture.

Thomas said maintaining property values was one of his biggest concerns, and Ms. Huffner agreed keeping Sandy Springs neighborhoods beautiful is of the utmost importance.

"Most people's retirement is tied up in their home," Thomas said.

Ms. Huffner added, "We need a thoughtful interpretation of the land use plan. We need to get the citizens more involved."

The candidates had differing opinions on the role of Sandy Springs in the state water crisis. While Ms. Willard and Thomas said the city needs to prepare to supply residents with water independent of the county and state, MacGinnitie and Ms. Huffner agreed water is an issue best left up to the experts at the state and regional levels.

The forum ended with four audience questions, which were submitted anonymously via note cards. Questions included the presence of adult entertainment stores and the possibility of extended bar closing hours, which all candidates said they were categorically against.

The final audience question, which Young said had been submitted by at least six people, addressed a possible conflict of interests between Ms. Willard and her husband, Republican District 49 state Rep. and Sandy Springs City Attorney Wendell Willard. Ms. Huffner and Thomas said they saw the topic as a non-issue while MacGinnitie said he had no comment.

"I have a wonderful example of a public servant in my family," said Ms. Willard. "The only issue where I would have to recuse my vote [on City Council] would be regarding my husband's contract."

The evening ended with closing statements from each candidate. Thomas urged the audience to hold city council members accountable for their actions. All candidates urged voters to head to the polls Tuesday and MacGinnitie reminded voters they have a duty to vote to form the type of government Sandy Springs deserves.