

## Naples City Council candidates express ways to protect city's character at forum

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NAPLES — It's all about character.

Naples City Council candidates said Tuesday they wanted to do whatever they could within the constraints of the budget to protect the city's character.

How they would do it was among a number of issues candidates discussed during Tuesday's **League of Women Voters** biannual candidate forum. The forum, held at Naples City Hall, is the only televised forum each election season.

There are three council seats open for election this year. The five candidates are Doug Finlay, Dorothy Hirsch, Councilman Gary Price, Sam Saad and Councilman Bill Willkomm.

Both Price, 44, and Willkomm, 59, are seeking reelection.

Naples City Council elections are Feb. 2.

Willkomm said he is trying to preserve the community's small town charm, while making sure excess money is not spent in this tough economic time.

"(Naples is) fishing off the pier. It's going to a football game on Friday night at Naples High. It's talking to people you've never met at Publix. It's sunset at on the beach," Willkomm said. "That's what I'm trying to preserve."

Preservation doesn't come cheap, though. During this fiscal year, the city faced a multi-million dollar shortfall, and the city took steps to ensure its level of service and quality of life was not disturbed.

Hirsch, 63, said, however, that she doesn't believe services should be reduced to balance the budget.

"We need to keep services and I know you don't want to use that quality of life word, but services are quality of life," she said.

Saad said the city needs to have a balanced budget, and that the city needs to look at efficiencies before it makes cuts.

But once those efficiencies are met, Saad, 32, said the city will then have to shift its focus.

“Once we squeezed the last ounce of extra spending out of the budget, we need to look at the essential versus the nonessential services,” he said. “When it comes to nonessential services, there are certain items we may have to cut.”

One focus that will not be cut, according to the candidates, is a focus on the environment. Candidates said Tuesday there needs to be a continued focus on protecting Naples Bay.

“We’ve made good progress over the past couple of years,” said Price.

“We’ve taken a strong stand and commitment (to the environment), and one of the things I can be proud of is we’ve stood up for the things that are critically important.”

Those things, Price said, include changes to the city’s fertilizer ordinance.

But in order to continue to preserve the character of the city – and create a good relationship between the residents and the business community – Finlay said the city needs to recognize the importance of its advisory boards, such as the community redevelopment advisory board and the community services advisory board.

Finlay, 58, said he believed overlooking the importance of those boards was among the worst decisions impacting business.

“There’s no single worst decision, but it’s when council or the CRA constantly avoids the (CRA advisory board) recommendation or when issues are brought up directly (at a meeting) instead of going through (an advisory board),” he said. “You should empower them.”

That empowerment, he went on to say, would help preserve the quality of life, as well as improve the business districts.

