

VIDEO: Jackson Lab, economy popular issues at Collier County commission forum

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NAPLES — The race is on and Collier County commission candidates on Wednesday had a chance to sound off on more than a dozen issues in advance of the Aug. 24 primary election.

The League of Women Voters of Collier County on Wednesday held two Collier County commissioner candidate forums. The forums gave voters in District 2 which covers North Naples and Pelican Bay and District 4 which covers Naples and Bayshore a chance to get to know the candidates.

There are three Republicans running for the District 2 seat being vacated by Commissioner Frank Halas: Gina Downs, Joe Foster and Georgia Hiller. The winner of the race will face Chuck Roth, a write-in candidate, in November.

There are two Republicans running for the District 4 seat: incumbent Commissioner Fred Coyle and Lavigne Kirkpatrick. The winner of this race will be the District 2 commissioner-elect.

Though the topics varied for each district forum, several issues such as the economy and Jackson Lab overlapped both forums.

All of the candidates said the economy was the No. 1 issue facing the county in coming years. Candidates cited the downturn in the economy, and decreased property values, as a hurdle they would have to overcome if elected to the board.

We need to make sure we're being as efficient as possible with your dollars, Foster said.

Those efficiencies, he said, could be achieved by creating an environment that allows local businesses to thrive. Foster said the county should make sure it's buying goods and services from local vendors, rather than looking out of county or state.

Downs and Hiller agreed the county needs to look at efficiencies to save money, such as consolidating departments or eliminating some regulatory measures.

Improving the economy did not mean using tax dollars to provide incentives to businesses, several candidates said.

"As a fiscal conservative I do not support tax subsidies," Hiller said. "(They are) in effect corporate welfare ... and it's fundamentally anti-competitive."

Kirkpatrick had a similar view and said she felt the government should not get involved in incentives.

“There are some roles government can play, but I always believe you should be giving someone a fishing pole and not a fish,” she said. “And I think that’s what we should do.”

Though the three remaining candidates said they saw the value of incentives, Foster said the county should first look at ways to offer incentives so taxes aren’t increased.

Both Coyle and Downs said they would support the effort to bring Jackson Lab to the community if it proved to be beneficial to Collier County’s economy, but both also said the \$130 million the county is being asked to pay needs to be vetted.

“I will repeatedly say I think the concept of a research park has enormous value for this county, for any county,” Downs said. “I will not throw a project like this under the bus for political purposes. But am I comfortable with a \$130 million local match? No.”

Coyle, who has been a staunch supporter of the Maine-based genetic research facility, said the county would not dedicate \$130 million on just the company.

“It is reckless and irresponsible to draw conclusions without all the facts, Coyle said. “Jackson Lab by itself is not something we want to spend \$130 million on, but if its a business cluster its a different issue.”

Hiller and Kirkpatrick both said they would support putting the expenditure to a public vote but Foster said it was too early in the process to make that decision.

The District 4 race is open to all registered voters in the district but only registered Republicans in District 2 can vote in Aug. 24 election.

Early voting begins Aug. 9.

