

SICTA Meets City Mayoral Candidates

By JOE HART

SEA ISLE CITY — Over 140 residents and taxpayers met candidates for mayor in the new form of government, coming to town soon.

Sea Isle City Taxpayers Association (SICTA) sponsored a forum held at Townsends Inlet Civic Center March 24.

George "Pat" Haffert and Donald A. Laricks took the stage to present platforms and answer voters' questions.

Mayor Leonard Desiderio was unable to participate because of a long-standing family commitment.

SICTA head Tom Henry opened the meeting, and thanked everyone for attending.

Candidates were given five minutes to introduce themselves and present their plans for the city.

Haffert, a marketing manager for Philadelphia-based Danbro Distributors, said his platform includes a successful change of power transition, transparent government, restored sense of community, business retention, long-term planning, school ideas and extension of sewers in the north end.

Haffert said he wants to hire the best city administrator on the planet.

"As mayor, I will be urging continued community involvement from SICTA members and others throughout the city," he said. "I won't be afraid to make the tough decisions."

Laricks, a local real estate broker, said his platform includes five key issues: the new city administrator, maintenance and beautification, business growth, citizen-oriented government and long-term planning.

"My son has taken over for me in the office allowing me to concentrate on the campaign," Laricks said. "If elected, I'll be a full-time mayor, which will be essential to a successful transition of government."

One of the main topics at the forum was the \$30,000 per pupil cost for the city's elementary school.

Laricks said when he was school board president in the '70s he based all of his decisions on what was best for the students.

As mayor he would have to also consider what was best for the town.

"Sending our kids to Ocean City would be good for them because it's a great school over there," Laricks said. "But, if we decide to close our school it would be forever and I don't know if that would be in the city's best interest."

Haffert said short-term, he would like to keep the school open, but he thinks the state will eventually force closure of smaller schools.

He cited a recent feasibility study that said the city would continue to lose students and said Ocean City is having the same problem.

"As mayor, the decision would not be up to me — it's the school board's call," he said. "But, I think we should try to keep the school open as long as we can."

An attendee asked what both would do to address "out-of-control" municipal

salaries.

Haffert suggested making a strategic plan to know where the city was in regard to its payroll and where it wanted to be in the future.

He said he wouldn't go in and fire all city employees, but would consider a hiring freeze and phasing out certain positions gradually.

He suggested privatization of some city services, citing garbage collection as a possible choice.

Laricks was against privatization.

"I think we have a lot of dedicated employees in Sea Isle," he said. "There are certain salaries that seem high, but, in general, I think we get an honest day's work out of most city employees."

Parking was a big issue for many.

Laricks said he had ideas on how to fix some of the parking problems.

He suggested eliminating parking meters two blocks from the beach, building a lot at 48th and Central, and reorganizing parking at the sewer plant, which could hold another 50 to 70 cars with better management.

Haffert said he was against parking on John F. Kennedy Boulevard because he sees it as a beautiful gateway into the city.

Someone wanted to know what the candidates' plans were about constant flooding in certain areas of town.

"Some say we were never supposed to build here," Haffert said. "We're surrounded by water and flooding will always be a problem."

He did, however, see some ways to manage the problem better, such as extending the sewer system into the north end of town and using the city Web site

to pass along emergency information.

Laricks said areas that consistently flood should be blocked off to traffic when conditions warrant.

Laricks said he plans to sell the lifeguard building at 44th and the beach for about \$2 million and build a new state-of-the-art complex at 39th Street with the proceeds.

Haffert said he liked the idea so much that he would implement Laricks' plan himself, if elected.

Both candidates expressed disappointment in the amount the city is paying for the new recreation building and tennis courts.

"We paid over \$800,000 for a recreation building with no room for recreation," Haffert said.

Henry thanked the candidates for participating in the forum and the audience for attending and asking such important questions.

Henry said he was impressed by both candidates.

"You can tell they did their homework on the issues," he said.

Henry invited the audience to attend the upcoming council forums on April 14 and 28.

He said there would be three topics discussed at each — business development, parking/streets and communications on April 14 and financial management, municipal salary/benefits and an open discussion on April 28.

"We aren't sure what format the event will take," Henry said. "With 20 candidates for council, they all won't fit on the stage."

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