

## San Rafael candidates compare key issues

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From dirty campaigning to leaf blowers, nothing was out of bounds at a forum featuring candidates for San Rafael City Council this week.

College of Marin trustee Greg Brockbank, Dixie School Board member Damon Connolly, Sun Valley resident Dick Lynch and former San Rafael fire chief Bob Marcucci appeared in a session hosted by the San Rafael-based Grassroots Leadership Network. Incumbents Paul Cohen and Gary Phillips are not seeking re-election.

Held at Pickleweed Park Community Center in the city's Canal area, many questions centered on neighborhood issues such as last spring's immigration raids, Hispanic representation at City Hall and development plans for East San Rafael.

Common themes heard throughout the campaign also were aired, such as controversy over a September "hit piece" mailer that appeared in San Rafael mailboxes targeting Marcucci's record as fire chief.

Also in September, the fire union threw its support behind Marcucci's opponents, Connolly and Brockbank. There is a history of tension between the former chief and some rank-and-file firefighters, stemming in part from disagreements over work conditions, management style and contract talks in late 2002.

Marcucci has denounced the practice of accepting independent expenditure campaign contributions from the same sources that print such mailers and said he asked his opponents to refuse such funds. Only Lynch has agreed, he said. Brockbank and Connolly both denied involvement in the mailer.

"Did they stand up and say independent expenditures are not the way we want to run our campaign?" Marcucci said. "Dick Lynch has and I'll leave it at that."

"I don't condone negative campaigning," said Connolly, who said he is operating "above board and running a positive campaign."

On last spring's Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids, several candidates said, while immigration is a federal matter, they were willing to look into making San Rafael a "sanctuary city," but needed to know more. More than 50 cities throughout the country - including San Francisco and Berkeley - have passed resolutions stating they are sanctuary cities and will not assist ICE in making its arrests.

Connolly said he would like to see a day labor center in town. Lynch said he would like to see a program that would usher in new arrivals legally.

Longtime Canal activist John Ortega asked if candidates would support electing council members by district rather than at large.

"I'm trying to figure out how we can mesh into the political life of our city," he said of Latinos, who he said are underrepresented at City Hall.

Most candidates said they would be open to it but wanted further study.

"Our boards and commissions ought to reflect the diversity of our city," Connolly said. "It's something I'd be interested in talking to the community about, but I haven't made up my mind."

Early plans to bring a Target store to the neighborhood by building the big-box retailer near Home Depot drew concern from activist Louise Yost, who feared such business is bad for the community.

"Non-locally owned businesses take money out of the community," she said.

Banning such businesses would likely affect sales tax revenue - and city services, Marcucci said.

Some, such as Lynch, thought standing in the way of free enterprise is a bad idea.

"I've been in business in San Rafael for 40 years and I don't think you can stop fair competition," he said.

The discounts and selection aside, "at some point you have to draw the line that it's damaging to the city and damaging to the businesses, which is the lifeblood of the city," Brockbank noted.

A dream to construct a bridge linking the neighborhood to Montecito shopping center and students to San Rafael High School drew mixed commentary.

"I'm not sure the bridge is the best alternative, but we need something," said Marcucci, who thought it might take too long to overcome the challenges necessary to gain approval.

"I believe the idea is worth taking a serious look at now," Connolly said.

No one liked the idea of shutting down Fourth Street to create a pedestrian promenade.

"The answer is no," Marcucci said. "You have to look at the safety element of Fourth Street and where does that traffic go? I've been at that fire house on C Street and we couldn't get a fire engine out."

"I think Bob is absolutely right," Lynch said.

Brockbank said he'd brought up the idea at one point, but as a long-term vision that tied in with a pedestrian-friendly society. "It'd be wonderful to have a pedestrian mall," he said. "That's some years off after we significantly reduce traffic."

Both candidates and audience members couldn't help laughing at a question submitted via the Internet on whether they would consider a ban on leaf blowers.

"I own one myself," Marcucci said. "I don't know - I'd have to know more about leaf blowers. Mine's quiet."

Brockbank came out against the devices. "Actually, I have strong feelings about leaf blowers. I think they drive everyone crazy and they ought to be banned," he said.

"You'd be in better shape if you used a rake."

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