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First Ward candidates weigh in on city development, marijuana, roll carts at forum

BY KELSI ANDERSON *Mar 12, 2015*

COLUMBIA — Candidates for the First Ward Columbia City Council seat faced questions about infrastructure, reduced marijuana penalties, roll carts and more at a public forum Thursday night at United Methodist Church.

Six of the nine First Ward candidates in the April 7 election attended.

Sal Nuccio, Dan Rader and recent write-in candidate Chad Phillips were absent.

Below are three of the questions posed at the forum Thursday, followed by each candidates' response.

There is a proposal to create a Community Improvement District in the Business Loop that would impose additional sales taxes and property taxes. Would you support a proposal such as this?

Nate Brown said the proposal is a "great idea." He said Business Loop is a main street in Columbia and is where most people draw their first perceptions of the area. He said he would support such a proposal to improve the area.

Jake Loft said it is important to improve the Business Loop and also mentioned the incoming traffic from Interstate 70 as a reason to improve the area. But Loft thinks that, rather than imposing new taxes, the city should focus on bringing in new businesses and building the Business Loop "organically."

Rob Stewart said he would not want to go against how people are voting, but wanted to do more research before speaking further on the subject.

Clyde Ruffin acknowledged that it is important to focus on the Business Loop because it is the first area that people getting off of the highway see, but he has concerns about using taxes to make those improvements. He'd like to do more research and increase his communication with people and businesses in the area that are most affected before he can have a firm opinion.

John Clark said the Businesses Loop has been a "disaster area" for years and is in dire need of improvements but that we need to "plan first." He said that the CID and the city need to get together first and develop a good "corridor plan."

Rob Rasmussen leans in favor of such a proposal if the CID would focus on temporary tax increases. He said the Business Loop has gone through tough times but thinks it is currently experiencing a "renaissance." He believes focusing on making the district "prettier" would benefit business.

A recent proposal to reduce penalties for small amounts of marijuana cultivation for personal use was struck down. If a similar proposal came up again, would you support it?

Brown didn't have an answer yet for his opinion but brought up a new cultivation ordinance in Washington, D.C., that reduced penalties. He said he was "intrigued" by the concept.

Loft said he would support such an ordinance, stating that when the council considered the last ordinance, it "didn't vote for the people and violated our trust." He said this was an example of a violation of the civil liberties that he is passionate about protecting.

Stewart was in favor of reducing marijuana possession penalties, saying the penalty of "five to 10 or five to 15 years (of incarceration)" for a small amount of marijuana is "absurd." He is also in support of medicinal use of marijuana.

Ruffin said he would support such a proposal and that supporting "it would be consistent with the views of the citizens."

Clark said the recent rejected ordinance was not ready for a vote because it contained several "problem areas." He would be interested in talking with stakeholders and getting data from other states to address these problem areas before such a proposal would come to a vote.

Rasmussen said supporting such a proposal is a "no-brainer," and the harsh penalties negatively affect people's lives, locking them out of federal financial aid and job opportunities. He would like to know the final number of plants that would be allowed, though, because he doesn't want Columbia to become a "safe haven" for marijuana sellers to take advantage of lax laws, increasing organized crime.

Do you or do you not support residential garbage changes, such as roll carts? Why or why not?

Brown said he has heard both sides, but if he were on the council, he would lean toward opposition of roll carts because he has heard lots of negative comments from people he has spoken with. Having used them in the past, he understands the arguments against roll carts. He would rather focus on the city's recycling program, which he said is "really sad."

Loft did not support a citywide roll cart ordinance, saying that forcing every person to pay "something like" \$75 for their own roll cart was a "burden" on taxpayers, and it could be a hassle for people who lived on hills, for example. He said the roll cart proposition was an example of the city "bullying the public into following their own agenda." His solution was that neighborhood associations should be the ones to decide what's best for their areas.

Stewart was not in favor of roll carts. He said one reason this proposal was brought up is because the trash department needs more money. But he believes this problem can be solved in other ways such as giving employees a more livable wage, benefits and enough hours. He also said that dropping incentives for trash workers to work quickly and investing in properly trained workers would reduce injuries and therefore reduce money spent on workers compensation cases.

Ruffin said, "I haven't heard from anyone who is in favor of roll carts, and so you have to respect that." Ruffin said the city says it has a problem of worker safety and that they are trying to sell residents the idea that roll carts are the solution, which Ruffin disagrees with. He said there have to be other options for a safe work environment and for recycling effectively and efficiently.

Clark was not in favor of roll carts, and said he wouldn't be as long as the city tries to "sell this to us the way it's doing." He said the solid waste utility, which includes residential trash collection, has problems. But he said the real problems lay in city administration and issues such as workman's compensation. He said these things could be addressed through "work study processes" and better training for trash workers.

Rasmussen said he did not have a "personal stake" and was not particular on how he personally has to throw away trash. He said he would defer to voters on the issue. He would like to see more public education on how to properly dispose of broken shards, which can injure trash workers and would "add to that \$300,000 in workman's comp injuries."

Supervising editor is Joe Guszowski.

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