

Council forum shows harbor, trail support

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Steve Boyd

Todd Hoskins

Holly Leo

Garnet Lewis

Chris Peterson

Corwin Stoppel

Six candidates for three open two-year seats on the Saugatuck City Council agreed at a candidate forum Monday that connecting the Blue Star Trail through town to neighbor communities should be a top priority entering the Nov. 5 election.

All — incumbent Christine Peterson plus Garnet Lewis, G. Corwin Stoppel, Holly Leo, Stephen Boyd and Todd Hoskins — also stressed the importance of dealing with Kalamazoo Lake Harbor siltation issues and improving relations with neighbor Douglas city and Saugatuck Township governments.

All — Leo could not attend, but provided an opening statement read aloud by a moderator — also urged better council communication with constituents.

Past that? The devil may be in the details, as some say. More than 60 residents attended the 90-minute, Holland League of Women Voters-sponsored session in the Saugatuck High School cafeteria.

At least two of the 7-member council taking office next month — Peterson would be a holdover — will be new to the body. Vacating seats will be current members Bill Hess (who filed this summer to run, then withdrew) and Catherine Simon (appointed as an interim after council veteran Jeff Spangler moved from the area this summer).

All hopefuls expressed their appreciation for the community during opening statements, plus the wish to participate in a positive, growing future.

Boyd, who with his wife Jen owns the Judson-Heath Colonial Inn, said his experience as a carpenter for the largest contractor in Chicago, plus serving four terms as a union officer, had given him hands-on operations, people and administrative experience. “I have skin in the game,” he said. “I’m running to increase the percentage of business owners on council.

Hoskins, also a business owner, said, “People care here. I’m running to protect the vitality of this special place. The danger is letting just a few people make decisions behind closed doors.”

“We need new voices to step up now,” said Leo in her written statement. As a property owner here 20 years, a homeowner for the last 10, I have been active in community causes. I believe a member of the creative community can add to the city council.”

Lewis, a businesswoman, university administrator for 30 years and now chair of the city planning commission and board of review, said she wants to apply her knowledge and experience in a community she loves fully.

Peterson, a former mayor and now mayor pro-tem, said she and her husband came to Saugatuck after she had served for years in Nebraska as a state senator and heading state agencies. “I want to continue the good things we have been doing in this community,” she stated.

Stoppel, who has lived here for 30 years, 29 of them as rector of All Saints’ Episcopal Church, said the latter role before had prevented him from becoming involved in city government, but now he was eager to serve in the latter role. “I’ve always wanted to make a great place even better,” he said.

The first audience question asked candidates noted the nonprofit Friends of the Blue Star Trail have sought but not received council support for two and a half years to build a 0.4-mile stretch through city limits. The group has a \$200,000 pledge that would complete the 4.5- mile northern stretch through Douglas and Saugatuck cities and Saugatuck Township of the proposed 20-mile non- motorized path pending Saugatuck council support for a plan by the end of this year. How would they address this?

“We have a bike trail,” Boyd said. “It exists, it needs to be safe and to work. This needs to be pushed through, made functional and beautiful.”

“Two and a half years is a long time,” said Hoskins. “It’s embarrassing. I hear those who want it done right, but other voices simply want to say no. I’m concerned with the way the Friends have been treated. Finish the trail collaboratively. Treat all with respect and dignity.”

“All the Friends are looking for is a letter of support to move forward,” said Lewis. “The reasons for not doing this so far are disappointing. I see a lot of personal agendas. We are in a tourist-attracting town. The simple next step of a letter of support should not be that difficult.”

“The city sponsored a trail stakeholders meeting recently,” said incumbent Peterson. “A support letter is a little more complicated. The last trail design we’ve seen from the Friends has almost everything I’ve looked for. I’m still concerned with it going over the Blue Star Bridge.

“Let’s get it done,” said Stoppel. “Simple as that. It promotes healthy activity and a growing tourist industry. Get the egos out of the way, we can make real progress.”

The five hopefuls were asked about certain board members’ roles in a group that opposed the Saugatuck Public Schools’ August bond proposal.

“As citizens,” said Hoskins, “we have a right to our opinions. The fact that a group of council members got together to defeat the school proposal is more problematic. The success of our community to some extent depends on our schools and a better dialog.”

Lewis agreed that as individuals, persons have a right to their opinions. “But when you step up to a public role,” she added, “everyone is watching. It’s important your personal opinions stay behind the scenes.”

“I agree our schools are phenomenal,” said Peterson. “As council members, it is not ours to sway other people. It’s important to have free speech, but we have to be careful with it.”

“As council members,” said Stoppel, “we must stay distinctly separate. The Saugatuck school board is also elected by voters. Don’t sabotage or stab them in the back.”

“The council doesn’t play a role in school votes,” said Boyd. “In a role of authority, anything you say swings weight. That said, all individuals have a right to their own votes.”

Per allowing recreational marijuana, as approved by state voters last year, within city limits, candidates’ views were mixed.

“I tried it in college and am not in favor of it now,” said Stoppel. “But we need to figure out what to do with this.”

“Pro or con,” said Lewis, “no matter how hard we try, recreational marijuana is coming. As a planning commission, we continue to study its implications. If we don’t get out in front of it, set boundaries and enforce them, there’s nothing to stop citizens from putting it on the ballot for unlimited use.”

“It’s legal,” said Hoskins. “It’s new, it provokes fear, it could bring business. It’s up to the planning commission to set conditions.”

“I don’t support allowing it on Butler Street,” said Peterson. “We have parking problems already. It’s before the planning commission now. We expect a recommendation from them in December.”

“I see this becoming a federal issue,” said Boyd. “Then you’ll be able to buy it like alcohol and cigarettes. This is going to be everywhere. Dispensaries will be short lived.”

Candidates further discussed downtown parking issues, with proposed solutions including expanding Interurban services, better street lighting and completing the Blue Star Trail.

In closing statements, Stoppel called for better communications between city hall and citizens. “We don’t have to agree on everything,” he said, “just do more explaining. Get information out there.

“My husband, Ernie, and I moved here 12 years ago and love it,” said Peterson. “Moving forward will require communication and collaboration.”

“We are blest to be here. It’s easy to complain,” said Lewis. But it’s important you have solutions. You must work with others to make them happen.”

“I declare the winner of this forum the people of Saugatuck,” said Hoskins. “You came here tonight. You’re involved. You care.”

“Honestly,” Boyd said, “there’s no place else in the world we would rather live. I’m so happy to be here. We’re all going to win,” he said.