

Forum: Taxes, water rates discussed

Three candidates for two seats on the Vernon city Commission agreed to face the public in March and answer questions. Don Smith, Molly Baldwin and Darien Williams answered multiple tough questions and the VDR is presenting their answers all this week.

The third question asked had to do with city finances. Moderator Daniel Walker stated: "People have talked about the water rate increase that was originally put in place a couple of years ago, and how it was left in place after it was originally implemented as an emergency matter. Property taxes have gone up. Do you feel that taxes and fees are at a good place? Do you think they need to stay the same, be lowered, or go up?"

Don Smith: "Well, I'm in the same position as a lot of you are, I pay taxes, I pay property taxes and they're high, they are apportioned by how much you own, what you have done to make (the property) better. I know I have to pay taxes for that and I don't like them going up. And I know that each one of you, I've talked to several of you, same thing with you, property taxes are high. We were promised a long time ago that when our water bill went up, that if we ever got to a point where we could roll it back that we would. Well, let's start rolling back our water prices."

Darien Williams: Definitely, something that I said I have been looking into. I spoke with the mayor on that matter and what I'm hearing and the explanations that I'm getting is there were a lot of investments made a few years ago with the city water pool, the pool that was installed, there was promises or agreements with the citizens that when we install this, when we install the center, there are gonna be some taxes assessed. Now, the situation that I'm seeing is that there was, the citizens were being told that this was only gonna be temporary. I have an issue with is where's the transparency, this is not right. If we say that we're going to temporarily raise taxes ... that's what we all agree on. That's what we should honor as city officials and that's what we should, you know, expect. We do have to consider the investments that's we're making in the town when our taxes do rise, there's a cause and effect for everything. Tax is what pays for a lot of things in the city, I just think that when we make an agreement like the water hike temporarily, then we need to honor that and if we're going to -- if there's a bump in the road or there's a situation that does come up -- I don't think that people were notified of that. At some point in time, city officials knew that it was going to take a little longer and so they should've notified the citizens that way we're all on the same page. We just need to be more transparent and more upfront with our citizens. I'm not a homeowner yet but my father is, with the property tax, I just think it has to be something that all property owners can agree on. If the taxes are too steep, then we need to move certain finances around, if there's enough homeowners that

are saying that it's too steep then we do have to take some sort of action and look into that and see how we can find a happy median between the homeowners, city officials."

Molly Baldwin: No increase in property tax or utility bills... have generated much of the city money as it is. I believe it's 8 percent. I understand that it was supposed to be temporary. I don't know if this coming drought trend is going to be

...
'Let's start rolling back our water prices.'

Don Smith
 City Commission Candidate

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 when all of a sudden we had one million dollars and we decided to pay off the pool. Now, when I wanted to pay off the mortgage on my house because I had this money, my advisor said to me, Molly, why don't you refrain from thinking that way and put your money to use. So, I'm thinking why wasn't the million dollars? We could've gotten a new loan for a comparative good rate, now with the feds raising the rates, you know, all the loan rates are going to go up, so if we needed to get one million dollars for an emergency for the street repairs, to do some of the stuff that we want to do, we have to go out and borrow it and put a bond... and maybe it won't be the rate that we have. I think perhaps we should add, take an extension on that loan, add the slightly increased rate but not at a rate that it's going to be and maybe use some of that money for relief, for what the things that we think we need. That's my one concern.



Forum: Talking city employees

City commission candidates Darien Williams, Molly Baldwin and Don Smith answered questions during a forum in March. The moderator, Daniel Walker, stated that a couple of questions were received from employees. He said one had to do with the employee benefit trust, which was raided several years ago as a way to get past an emergency funding issue.

"The city has started paying that back. Do you think that should be paid back with interest or do you think that as a no interest loan bank for the city? And also, do you think that city employees deserve annual raises?" he asked.

Molly Baldwin answered first.

Baldwin: I think that we have to pay our city employees a commensurate rate. They deserve a pat on the back. We have a terrific fire department. We have a

terrific police department. We have terrific employees. What we're doing is trying to recruit and retain those people. If we increase their (insurance) deductibles and if we increase the copay, we have decreased the salary. (On the EBT) So, as of December, 17, the employee trust benefit fund had 5 months of reserve and we were looking good. I don't know what the original agreement was. Was it paid back in time or was it paid back with interest. Whatever the agreement was, that's the agreement that should be honored but I do have a problem with the raiding that went on in previous administration. ... I just want to reiterate here that we have to appreciate what we've got. If we don't have a good fire department or firefighters and EMS that are willing to put their lives on the line and the police department, who go out every day and protect us no matter what, if we don't re-

tain those quality people, we don't have much of a town.

Don Smith answered next: I agree with Molly on all of that. I understand that we need quality employees and the way to have quality employees is to get their salary up to the point where it's better than just minimum wage. I don't know exactly what an employee makes right now, probably more than what I did when I was working. But I never had a trust fund when I was working, I'm on social security right now, thankfully my wife did and she was able to retire off of her 32 years as a teaching. I do believe that the employees who have trust funds, I believe that needs to be guarded. I don't think that we need to be dipping into that and trying to take out of it. To me, that's ridiculous. The government does enough of that with our own taxes. Let's guard that for our citizens and for those that work hard for it -- our EMS people, emergency people, and our first responders and city employees. Let's guard it. I don't want a city employee to retire and say, well, I didn't get as much of it as I expected because the city took a lot out of it.

Darien Williams was third: I don't think that city officials and city leadership should be borrowing from employees. That's something that I think I can prevent. If we work with certain organizations and we borrow from federal loans and we take a different approach and manage it the right way, I don't think that we should be even thinking about touching the employee benefits. I've seen where there's a few spots and a few positions open, city positions open, I think those need to be filled. I think every position that is required downtown, police department, fire department, I think we should be full staffed. These are the people who keep our city running and so definitely we want to and I'm going to take that in consideration that city ... (workers) are wanting their benefits and what should be promised to them, and we're going to try to stick to that word and if not, we're going to do what we have to do to get them those funds back and then take a different approach next time. (The city) just went the wrong direction.

Moderator: So all of you are against rating the employee benefit trust and all of you are in favor of employee raises, annual employee raises

Smith: I think those need to be on, I don't know Daniel, ... on a case to case basis. Each employee, when asking for a raise, we would go in there and we would talk to them and we would ask them questions and then we would do a case to case basis as to how we were going to give them a raise instead of doing everyone the same way.



Four candidates turned out to face the public at the Vernon Daily Record's candidate forum held March 22, 2018. Moderator, and Vernon Record's managing editor, Daniel Walker, presented

questions from the public for each of the candidates to voice a response.

Payton McCormick/Vernon Record

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Darien WILLIAMS

City Commissioner Pct. 2

“ I'm looking to bridge the gap between all communities giving every citizen a voice. Innovative and fresh future projects in mind for betterment of Vernon. ”