

Candidates grapple with public's view of commission

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Too many people view county government as non-existent, or non-essential.

"A lot of people don't even know there's a county system of government," said Democrat Ryan Gesund, challenging Republican incumbent David Moffitt in the Nov. 3 race for a two-year seat to serve Oakland County Commission's 18th District. "I've had a lot of people, when I first started running, say, 'You're running for drain commissioner?'"

It's a perception that needs to be changed for the better, said Gesund and other commission hopefuls who participated in a Wednesday, Oct. 7 candidate forum.

That might happen if county commissioners work harder at communicating with their constituents, particularly to deal with serious issues such as: 911 service surcharges; "on-the-spot-frequency" police commu-



nication at emergencies such as the Wixom shooting rampage in 1996; funding and management of mental health services; overloaded roads and sewer systems. The forum at Farmington Hills City Hall, hosted by the Council of Homeowners Associations of Farmington Hills, pitted opponents in the 18th and 19th county commission districts. Both races, for two-year terms, include 18th District (northern half of Farmington Hills), Moffitt versus Gesund; in the 19th District (south of 10 Mile Road in Farmington Hills), Republican and longtime Farmington Hills City Council member Terry Sever versus Democrat Debbie Goldberg.

The candidates were questioned by Joanne Maliszewski, editor of the Farmington Observer.

er, Jim Stark, editor of the Northwest Gazette, and COHA board member Gail Haynes. Questions also were taken from members of the audience and from those who telephoned them in.

For the most part, candidates were respectful of each other during the forum, which was cablecast. But their different stances on issues were still clearly evident.

"They kept it clean," said one member of the audience, afterward.

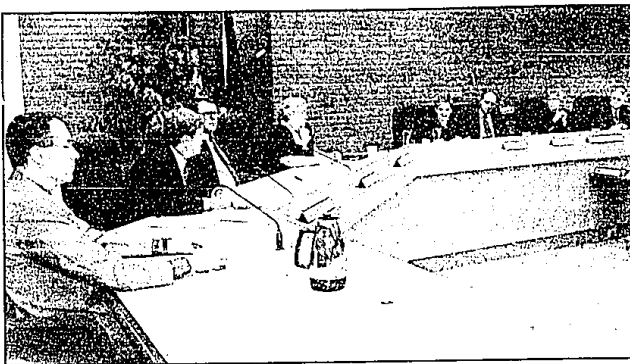
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The first question asked how each candidate would help bring county government and the public closer together.

First up was Gesund, who said he would favor the county setting up a satellite office at Farmington Hills City Hall, to serve one of the biggest cities in the district. He also favored more county meetings being televised and "just being around the community, being at subdivision board meetings... to discuss things with people."

His opponent, Moffitt, concurred that county government "is not as visible as we would like it to be." But he stressed that progress has been, and will continue to be made in the communications area. Moffitt said he pulled the strings that led to the first televised county commission meeting several years ago, and now town meetings all over Oakland County are on TV.

"We publish newsletters," Moffitt said. "We try to visit every



STAFF PHOTO BY LEE CAUSEGUE

Panel: From left Oakland County Commission candidates Ryan Gesund, David Moffitt, Terry Sever and Deborah Goldberg are questioned by a panel.

community meeting we can."

According to Sever, more involvement with homeowners groups such as COHA and businesses wouldn't hurt. Neither would the kind of hard work he delivered into first hand on the Farmington Hills City Council, to try to solve difficult problems such as this year's rash of basement floodings. Regular correspondence with councils also could be invaluable.

"What's very important is most residents are not interested in

government unless it affects them directly," Sever said. "In that situation, (such as) with the flooding, we respond directly, get into the trenches and respond to people."

"I'd like, in two years should I decide to run again, that the No. 1 question not be 'What does a county commissioner do?'"

Goldberg said better use of television is essential to get through to the public. "People like to say to me, 'Do we have a county commissioner now?' The whole thing in a nutshell is (meetings) need to be on television, because that is the medium that people watch, the thing they use to learn by."

All candidates agreed that fixing the 911 problem is crucial, largely to make sure all public safety departments are using the same kind of communications equipment during emergencies such as the Wixom Ford plant shooting. But each had their own views on what a solution might entail.

Incumbent Moffitt, for example, said there are two parts of the 911 problem that need to be understood: enhancing 911 communication and unifying police communication. "They are separate. We believe we have a solu-

tion, but (it's) one that doesn't necessarily involve a tax surcharge."

Moffitt did say that 49 counties in Michigan already have enacted up to 4 percent surcharges on residentially based line charges, allowable by state law.

If Oakland County follows suit, a fee of 56 to 65 cents per residential line per month (\$7.80 per year) would be assessed, said Goldberg.

"To an individual family, that's not a huge expense," Goldberg said. "The business community, however, with multiple lines, is having difficulty digesting how their portion of that is going to be absorbed."

Sever said a fund of new growth revenue should be set aside for 911 improvement, not a tax or surcharge on telephone lines.

"Once they are able to determine what the cost is, what the program's going to be, what the equipment's going to be... they should move forward," Sever said.

If a tax is needed to save lives, it's worth doing, Gesund emphasized. "Whether it takes a surcharge or not, safety is the over-

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