

The sweeter side of local politics

Beach candidates bring cookies to political forum

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Five candidates competing for three spots on Fort Myers Beach Town Council brought cookies – some fresh baked, some store bought – last week to sweeten an evening of political play and debate.

The cookie debate was the brainchild of the Fort Myers Beach Chamber of Commerce and its president, John Albion.

The cookies were supposed to be judged by the audience before the political forum began. It would have been their first election but that didn't happen. Some people complained.

"There were legislative concerns over someone gaining an advantage through cookies – the baking of which are not seen as a crucial issue," Albion said. "Still, as the candidates are in the spotlight, everything they do or say could reflect on their candidacy."

"I thought it went over well, and even the cookies said something about the candidates... We weren't trying any tricks; it was just to promote a social atmosphere. I thought (the cookies) gave it a nice twist."

Candidate Tom Babcock said he liked the chocolate cigars that candidate Stephen Light brought. "Now, I don't smoke – and I certainly don't smoke cigars – but it smelled good," he said.

So the crowd munched away before a question and answer session began: candidates and their wives, friends, local press, PAPO (Politically Active Property Owners) and two fifth graders who later asked questions Babcock called "insightful and very

well presented."

Babcock, for example, brought cookies from Fort Myers Beach stores to show support for local business, he said. The sole female candidate Jo List had delegated her cookie baking to a friend.

"I'm voting for Jo because she's a good out-sourcer," Fort Myers Beach resident Jodi Hester said. "...The best cookies are the homemade – you have to go with the homemade."

Hester was sitting in back next to candidate Bob Raymond's wife, Donna, who had made a fragrant oatmeal cookie studded with nuts and raisins.

"I made the little flags on the cookies too," Mrs. Raymond said.

The little blue flags on toothpicks said "Vote for Bob."

Tom Myers, owner of Red Coconut RV Resort, was there to hear the debate.

"I'm a resident and business owner on Fort Myers Beach so I'm very interested in the outcome," he said, but also had opinions about the cookies.

"The chocolates are good but these other ones are very good...I think it's got pieces of chocolate and nuts in it too."

Then the candidates got down to the more mundane political aspects. They answered questions about beach cleanup, dredging canals, transportation, parking, themselves and one from Lee County Sheriff Mike Scott



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

The "Commotion by the Ocean," was held last week to introduce the candidates to the public with debate and cookies.

(who wasn't there in person) asking if Fort Myers Beach plans to continue its relationship with his office. All candidates agreed that it would, although List said she'd like some officers to be more friendly, like they used to be.

"I don't get that same friendly vibe from all of them now," she said. "Some of them, but not all of them."

Clayton Whitcraft and Nicholas Lacorte, fifth grade students at Fort Myers Beach Elementary School, also asked pointed questions about the environment and public safety.

Clayton asked if there was a place to have a skatepark. Babcock suggested closing down a street on occasion.

"Those speed bumps might be a lot of fun, actually," he said.

Tezak said children's safety, in particular protection from vagrants or the homeless, is

a concern.

"Well, I enjoy skateboarding still, so hopefully I could come," Light said.

And during the "fun questions" segment of the evening, when all the candidates were asked to tell what no one knows about them, Light said, "I go skinny dipping at night in the Gulf."

After a brief silence he added, "Only when there's no moon." And then, as a few snickers emitted from the audience, "...on occasion."

List admitted during that segment that



she was on the soundtrack for the first laser light show that toured the United States. And Raymond told the crowd he drove racecars for more than eight years.

After the televised segment was concluded, people went back for more cookies. They hovered over the treats, finally pulling themselves away, making comments like "Not too shabby" and "I gotta get away from these."

Albion coordinated and mediated the event called "Commotion by the Ocean," to introduce the candidates to the public; also, he said to "hopefully show a side of them that wouldn't come out as clearly in normal campaign functions."

For candidate David Tezak, this is his first run for public office.

"I gotta tell you I think it's been an awesome experience," he said. "What's really been neat is getting out and talking to people."

The Commotion is a tradition as much social as political – this was the 21st annual meeting (others had been held on the roof of the Lana Kai Inn and at local churches).

"The cookies were new and the student questions were new," Albion said. ■

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