

Redlands picks

Press Enterprise

10:00 PM PDT on Friday, September 28, 2007

Nothing is more central to Redlands' future than putting the city on a firm financial foundation. Without a City Council willing to make the tough decisions necessary to keep the city's budget in order, Redlands' services and its quality of life remain under fiscal threat.

So voters looking at the Nov. 6 council race should put one question foremost: Which candidates offer the best chance of fixing Redlands' finances -- even if it means standing up to the city's public-employee unions? Of the seven candidates on the ballot, voters would do well to support Pete Aguilar and Jerry Bean.

Aguilar, appointed by the council to fill a vacant seat last year, has been in office 17 months. In that time, he has worked constructively with a council that has balanced the budget for the first time in six years, increased street maintenance and started addressing the city's long-term fiscal challenges. Those are promising signs that recommend Aguilar for a full term.

Aguilar's desire to cut expenses by finding efficiencies at City Hall is sensible, though that strategy alone will not solve the city's financial woes. And he recognizes the need to spur retail and commercial growth to bolster city revenue over the long term.

Bean is publisher of Century Group Newspapers, which operates six community newspapers outside of Redlands and has no affiliation with The Press-Enterprise. He offers experience in business management and budgeting -- expertise well-suited to Redlands' priority need. Bean correctly points out that generating sales-tax revenue alone will not end the city's immediate financial crisis. Redlands has to restrain spending over the next few years to stay solvent, and he is nearly alone among the candidates in talking specifically about budget cuts to stem the flow of red ink.

Likewise, Bean's opposition to additional warehouses in Redlands shows a realistic approach to economic growth. The city needs revenue-generating businesses, not operations that consume large tracts of the land available for development without providing any boost to city coffers. And Bean is a strong advocate for open government who could temper the city manager's tendency to restrict public access to city information.

While Bean sees the necessity of making tough decisions on city spending, not all candidates do. Redlands, with 71,000 residents, faces a projected \$7.2 million budget gap over the next three years. **Plugging that budget hole inevitably means addressing the 68 percent of the current \$57.9 million general fund budget that goes to salaries and benefits.** The city cannot stabilize its finances by leaving two-thirds of general-fund spending off limits.

Incumbent Gilberto Gil, endorsed by the city police and fire unions, in February ruled out any layoffs as the city struggled with deficits. **No one wants layoffs, but Gil's stance suggests little willingness to address employee costs.**

And **challenger Jeff Sceranka ignores the short-term financial squeeze**, saying the real issue is not city spending but lagging revenue. Yet the city's general fund revenues have grown by 33 percent since 2004-05, and Redlands still faces shortfalls, thanks to rising pension and salary costs. The failure to confront that issue undercuts Sceranka's otherwise sound ideas on economic development.

Aguilar will have to show that he, too, can make politically tough choices to bring spending under control, even if that includes tackling personnel costs. Aguilar, who's understandably been in learning mode, will need to strengthen his voice on the council and demonstrate that he puts the taxpayers' best interests first. And he will need to do better in curbing the city manager's policies that limit access to government information.

There is no simple, painless way out of Redlands' budget crunch. Only candidates who show the promise of facing up to that reality deserve support: Jerry Bean and Pete Aguilar.