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Debate Covers District Priorities

Citizens hear from candidates on development and other issues affecting Providence District.

Mirza Kurspahic
May 30, 2007

Transportation, development, crime and education were just some of the issues covered in the only scheduled debate between Linda Smyth and Charlie Hall, candidates for the Democratic Party's nomination for the Providence District Board of Supervisors seat. For one hour on Wednesday, May 23, Providence citizens posed questions to the candidates, through a moderator, they felt were most relevant for the race.

According to Hall, growth and traffic are the most important issues in the county, and some citizens have lost trust that the current Board of Supervisors is best able to serve them. "We simply have no confidence that the county has a workable plan," he said. Hall added that the current board is quick to blame other people for the county's problems, and said it pawned off Dulles Toll Road for one project, Rail to Dulles. "What we need most is new style of leadership," he said. "Problems are significant, but so are our resources."

DURING THE DEBATE, Hall challenged Smyth that in her four years as a supervisor she governed behind closed doors, rarely appearing in front of her constituents, which he said is a primary role of a supervisor. Another primary role, he said, is that the supervisor should set an agenda that brings the community together. "Best local government is a 'we' process, not an 'I' process," said Hall, promising to be a proactive leader on big issues once elected.

"We've worked together on a lot of things, we've accomplished a lot," said Smyth about the last four years. "This has been the most progressive board in county's history," she added. According to Smyth, over the last four years the board has committed its resources towards preservation of affordable housing, enacted plans to improve the environment and end homelessness and increased the number of after school and gang prevention programs.

Smyth said the county board, before approving the Tysons Corner development which will add significant residential and office space along the planned Metrorail corridor, set aside money for an independent transportation study, to see how much development the area's transportation network could bear. "That's a big step, the first time that's really been done that way," she said. Smyth added that the mission of the Tysons Corner Task Force, which she helped initiate, is to conduct outreach to all members of the Tysons community, including citizens and businesses.

Hall, who answered each question first, said traffic was the biggest problem Fairfax County citizens faced. "Nobody expects our supervisors to miraculously clear the roads, but we can expect from our supervisors not to make [the problem] worse," said Hall. He added that the Board of Supervisors should not approve development projects without proper infrastructure improvements. "We need to build communities that work," he

Debate Format Questioned

Some people who attended the Wednesday, May 23, Providence District Democratic Primary debate between Linda Smyth and Charlie Hall came away from the debate angry with the League of Women Voters' format of the debate. Hall was asked to answer each question first, prompting a reaction from some members of the audience. The debate rule, as outlined by the League of Women Voters, stated, "The order for answering questions will alternate between the two candidates, beginning with candidate who gave first opening statement." Hall said he passed a note to Sherry Zachry, the debate moderator, to bring her attention to the issue. "They didn't follow the rules," said Hall. He said that while it took him a few minutes to adjust to the format, he did not feel it hurt him in the debate. Some members of the audience had a more drastic reaction to the format. "I've never seen the League botch it so hard," said Tom Hirst. He said the mishap was intentional. "Absolutely it was a fix," he said.

Hall disagreed. "I would be very surprised if it was intentional," said Hall.

Russ Ekanger, who has invited both candidates to a second debate, said the format of Wednesday's debate was biased. Hall said he had accepted Ekanger's invitation.

"Unfortunately, because of choices made by Linda, there will be only one debate," said Hall. As far as Wednesday night's debate is concerned, Smyth said she did not feel the format worked to her advantage. "I don't think the questions were such"

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said.

Hall also criticized Smyth, along with the rest of the county board, for conducting closed-door meetings regarding the Rail to Dulles project. "There is one place where public policy should take place, and that's in the public," he said. He added that even the consideration of an elevated track through Tysons Corner constitutes terrible planning. "I cannot imagine what would happen to Ballston and Rosslyn with an elevated track above Wilson Boulevard," said Hall.

Smyth said a meeting was held behind closed doors because of legal implications. She said attorneys from the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, a funding partner for the project, briefed the board on the Rail to Dulles contract. She said the public meeting on the contract is set for June 4.

Smyth said growth in the county was inevitable, and the biggest issue is how the county deals with it. "We're not always masters of our own fate," she said, alluding to the federally mandated Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC), which will add more than 20,000 jobs to Fort Belvoir.

Hall said he uses public transportation five times a week. He said the metro system is desperately overcrowded, and the current board is offering no realistic solution to that problem. He is also concerned with the financial feasibility of the metro system, given the numbers of people who would move into developments approved in rail corridors.

Smyth, who said she uses the metro a few times a month for her Council of Governments meetings, said a good chunk of money from this year's General Assembly transportation package would go to metro improvements. Also, she said, the board has in the past issued bond referendums for capital improvement projects, including metro improvements.

The citizens also wanted to know how the candidates planned to make housing in Providence District more affordable. Hall said that in recent years Fairfax County lost a chance to preserve many affordable units, because developers do not provide 12 percent of new units as affordable, as is outlined in the policy plan. In the case of Metro West, a development of 2,248 residential units near the Vienna Metro Station, Hall said the developers preserved 6 percent of the units as affordable. The approval of that development sparked Hall into action to found Fairfax Citizens for Responsible Growth, a grass-roots citizen organization.

Smyth, on the other hand, said the county had set up the penny fund for affordable housing, which helped it preserve 1,400 units, more than the county's goal of 1,000 affordable units preserved. "We're doing really well," said Smyth. She said any future development would add to the stock of affordable units.

CITIZENS IN THE AUDIENCE offered different opinions as to the candidates' responses. "I didn't hear Linda Smyth say anything in regards to development and transportation to answer concerns of her constituents," said Craig Crutchfield. Crutchfield's main concern is that supervisors should do more to protect existing neighborhoods from impact caused by new development projects, such as their impact on schools in the neighborhood. He said the entire county benefits from new developments, due to increased tax revenue, yet the local neighborhoods are asked to bear the costs of those new developments.

According to Will Elliott, often, when impact studies are conducted, developers hire the contractors to do the study. Instead, he said, the county should hire those contractors, using funds from the developers. "It's a question of governance," he said.

Del. Jim Scott (D-53) said the debate was useful, because it covered many prominent issues. He said Smyth demonstrated that she knew the Providence District problems, particularly the transportation issues. He also said Smyth has more interaction with her constituents than other politicians do. "There is nobody who has had more interaction with the public than Linda," said Scott. "Charlie didn't come across with much except criticism of what is Linda's strength, her community outreach," said Scott. He said Hall should not be elected just because he disagreed with one decision [Metro West development] Smyth and the board made. "Charlie looked like the whining critic of the latest blockbuster movie," said John Jennison. He said the clear distinction between the candidates is that Smyth works to solve the problems, while Hall offers only criticism and no solutions.

Russ Ekanger, representing youth athletic organizations such as the Vienna Little League and Vienna Youth

that there was advantage gained by answering after Hall, she said. "There were no surprise questions," said Smyth. "Any debate is better than no debate," said Hall.



Photos by Mirza Kurspahic/The Connection
Supporters of both Linda Smyth and Charlie Hall gather outside James Lee Community Center prior to the debate held on Wednesday, May 23.



Charlie Hall and Linda Smyth tackled an assortment of prominent issues in the May 23 debate held at James Lee Community Center in Falls Church.

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Soccer, said he invited the two candidates for a second debate. While Hall has accepted the invitation, Ekanger said Smyth told him she was too busy to do a second debate. "I couldn't believe a public figure doesn't have time for her constituents," said Ekanger. He said the debate would ask questions that pertain to the interests of the youth athletics and other organizations involved in it, including the Hunter Mill Defense League and the North Gallows Road Coalition. "I don't understand how she can be that cavalier about it," said Ekanger.

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