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Mayor candidates touch on housing

Vermont Town Meeting Day

By John Briggs, Free Press Staff Writer

Burlington's four major mayoral candidates met again Thursday in a formal debate, and after 90 minutes of rapid-fire questions in an AARP-sponsored forum at the Hilton Burlington on Battery Street, moved to a Neighborhood Planning Assembly forum at the Heineberg Senior Center.

Next week, the candidates — Progressive Mayor Bob Kiss; Democratic Councilor Andy Montroll; independent Dan Smith; and Council President Kurt Wright, a Republican — have debates Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

Thursday, as has been true throughout the campaign, the candidates were serious, well-informed, articulate and polite to each other.

They agreed the city needs more senior housing and should make sure the two senior centers, always hard-pressed for operating funds, stay open.

On that issue, Kiss suggested the city, which provided \$75,000 this year in General Fund money to the centers, might have to turn to a special tax, such as the Penny for Parks tax voters approved in November to pay for park maintenance.

Kiss opposed that parks tax, and he was the only candidate to suggest that approach. Smith, in keeping with his "grow-the grand list" theme, said an expanded tax base would generate more money for many of the city's needs.

Wright said the General Fund help was appropriate and should have been done before the senior-center "crisis" of the last year.

Montroll said the city should work with the centers to find grant money but use General Fund money to keep them from closing. "We can't let that happen," he said.

Asked whether the city's system for building affordable housing worked well, Smith answered, "No," and said the just-completed zoning ordinance failed to support the level of density the city needs.

Wright said the city needs to re-examine "every tool we use" and look to the example of cities such as South Burlington. He didn't provide specifics.

Montroll agreed with Smith and Wright that the city needs a variety of new housing but said the first step to improvement would be a citywide inventory to understand what sites are available and what kind of housing might go in each. Such an inventory would simplify the permitting process, he said.

Kiss said the city needs help from the state and federal governments, but said the city has "done a fantastic job" in creating affordable housing.

The senior housing proposal for the old Wick Estate on Appletree Point came up. The initial proposal, now stalled, was for about 200 units.

Montroll, Smith and Wright all said North Avenue, at the old state building, would be a preferable site, as it was closer to shopping and transportation. Kiss said, "We have to let the process work" as the Wick Estate proposal moves ahead.

Toward the end of the debate, moderator Ken Picard from Seven Days asked what the most serious quality-of-life question is for Burlington.

For Smith, it was the scarcity of jobs to keep residents here and lure new ones, to grow the grand list.

Wright answered similarly: Burlington, he said, has a "great quality of life," but there are "clouds on the horizon." Economic development, he said, would be the top priority for his administration.

Montroll answered that keeping life pleasant in the neighborhoods and the waterfront accessible to the public were at the top of his list.

Kiss answered more broadly. Global warming, he said, is at the top of his list, and Burlington needs to do its part to avert a looming environmental catastrophe. "Around us," he said, "our environment is changing. It's our responsibility to respond to this issue now."

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Additional Facts

Upcoming debates

- **Sunday**, 3-5 p.m., Ohavi Zedek Synagogue, 188 N. Prospect St.
 - **Tuesday**, 7-9 p.m., Vermont Workers' Center Forum, at the Imani Youth and Family Center, 294 N. Winooski Ave.
 - **Wednesday**, 6:30-7:30 p.m., Boys and Girls Club Debate, 62 Oak St.
 - **Thursday**, 7-8:30 p.m., Democracy for America Forum, Sapa Tea House, 9 Center St.
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