

Santa Ynez Valley incumbents, challengers sharply divided in SYCSD, ID-1 candidates forum

- Mike Hodgson, Sep 28, 2018

Incumbents and challengers were sharply divided about the policies and management of the Santa Ynez Community Services District and the Santa Ynez River Water Conservation District, Improvement District No. 1 during a candidates forum Thursday in Los Olivos.

All of the candidates for each district turned out for the forum sponsored by WE Watch and the Santa Ynez Valley News at St. Mark's-in-the-Valley Episcopal Church.

A crowd of about 50 people — a number of them employees of the districts — heard the candidates answer questions about water supplies, wastewater treatment, steelhead trout recovery and the districts' relationships with their customers.

But the overarching theme seemed to be the challengers criticizing each district for a perceived lack of transparency, aggressive policies and poor relationships with customers, with the incumbents defending their actions, praising the performance of their respective staffs and criticizing their opponents for a perceived lack of knowledge.

On several occasions, moderator John Parke had to admonish the candidates against making personal attacks, advising them to stick to the issues, but the antagonism repeatedly flared, although the sparring remained civil.

Four questions developed by WE Watch and the Santa Ynez Valley News and tailored for each district were presented to the candidates in advance of the forum. Questions submitted by audience members were posed following a brief break.

Candidates for the SYCSD board are incumbents David Higgins and David Seymour and challengers David Beard and Robert D'Ambra.

For ID-1, the board candidates are at-large seat incumbent Brad Joos and challenger Allen Anderson, Division 2 seat incumbent Jeff Clay and challenger Anita Finifrock, and Division 3 seat incumbent Kevin Walsh and challenger Brian Schultz.

The first audience question was posed to ID-1 candidates:

What is your position on regulating groundwater use for agriculture?

Walsh said groundwater regulation is now state law, and Santa Ynez River Water Conservation District — ID-1's parent district — has divided the river into three sections, with the Santa Ynez area in the eastern section.

He said there must be stakeholder participation in determining how to manage the eastern section of the river.

"We're fortunate in that our groundwater basin is not overdrafted," he said.

Schultz said the State Water Resources Control Board is trying to exert ownership over all groundwater in the state, but to do so it must show a basin is in decline.

"The use of groundwater for agriculture is a simple fact of life here, but a lot is returned to the groundwater," he said, advising users to be judicious to avoid forcing the basin into decline.

Joos stressed cooperation in management of the groundwater.

"We're all in it together," he said. "We've got to work together. ... It's what it is."

Finifrock agreed with that advice.

"There are places in the San Joaquin Valley where the ground has dropped 14 feet due to pumping," she said. "It's very important we all work together."

Clay said locals must make sure their voices are heard in the issue of regulation.

"Using groundwater for agriculture is reliable, it's a good source," he said. "The issue is regulation versus overregulation."

Anderson agreed with the other candidates.

"Invasions by regulatory agencies is a fact of life," he said. "We need to have a seat at the table and engage them head-on."

The second audience question was for SYCSD candidates:

Santa Ynez is a small, rural community. I like my septic system. Why would you not survey Santa Ynez Valley residents regarding their desire for a sewer system, especially when ID-1 says there are no problems with effluent getting into the groundwater?

Seymour chose to pass on that question.

Higgins said in the mid-1970s, septic systems along Calzada Street were failing and effluent was getting into the creek, so the county placed a moratorium on the area until a sewer system was built and functioning, which happened in 1978.

"There are residents in the area that are not on the sewer," he said. "All the district provides is an option. ... The only agency that can make you go on the sewer is County Environmental Health."

D'Ambra said conducting a survey makes sense.

He noted a septic system is a living system of its own, but people throw in things like cigarette butts and sanitary napkins the systems can't handle and cause them to shut down.

He recommended educating the community about septic systems, which would make the board look good for providing them with a service.

"Why wouldn't you?" Beard said, repeating the question. "Well, they didn't. ... They don't ask the community what you want. They tell you. That's wrong."

He said the district told him nitrates were high in his area when in fact they had dropped.

The third audience question was posed to all the candidates for both districts:

What are your expectations for staff?

ID-1 candidates answered first.

Anderson said he expects water to be delivered as it is today, adding the staff has "done a great job with that," along with more transparency, access to the board, a measurement of customer satisfaction, a reduction in legal fees and to be more open-minded when dealing with other water districts.

Clay said he expects the staff to be a conduit of information to the board, adding the district is doing as much with 15 staff members as an agency on "the other side of the mountain" is doing with 27 or 28.

"My expectations are being met quite nicely," he said.

Finifrock said she expects more open customer service, more interaction with the public, more transparency, an improved website and clearer meeting agendas.

Joos said he wants the staff to be courteous and respectful, and he praised the "excellent staff" for their local knowledge.

"This staff is so knowledgeable it confounds me," he said.

Schultz said he expects customer service excellence.

"I think there's a lot of room for improvement there," he said. "If I'm a customer and I can't even penetrate as far as the general manager, that's a problem."

He noted the problem is not with the staff, however, but with the policies they must implement.

"The staff in the office — they're nice people, but they're dealing with policies that are too aggressive."

An emphatic Walsh said the four women staff members in the audience deserved an apology for comments made by the challengers in response to other questions.

"I'm giving it to you now," he said. "You shouldn't have to come here and be upbraided for the fantastic job you're doing. You are the best I have ever worked with. I'm really upset about the comments made here about you."

The SYCSD candidates responded next.

"The board is the ruling body and the staff should follow," Beard said. "I have no problem with the staff other than the manager."

Beard said the manager won't speak with customers or respond to their questions.

"I think that comes from the current board, which has directed him not to answer," he said, adding that makes him think the board is hiding something.

D'Ambra said the district should incentivize the staff out in the field to come up with money-saving ideas, which would make them feel like part of the family.

"Only the ones down in the field know what's going on," he said, adding that if they have an idea that will save the district thousands of dollars, "I have no problem paying a little money."

Higgins said when the sewer system went online in 1978, the district was told it would last 20 years. It's now been in operation more than 40.

"You can thank the staff," he said. "They are on top of it. As soon as there's a problem, it's dealt with effectively. ... My experience is all the employees are happy with their jobs, they like their jobs."

Seymour agreed, adding that when he sees staff working in the field, he stops by, asks questions and they show him what they're doing.

"Our system is in excellent condition for its age ... it's because of the employees," he said.