

Top Story Spotlight

Flock, budget and schools: Roanoke City Council candidates weigh in at forum



At a candidate forum in Greater Deyerle Thursday night, Roanoke City Council candidates had to pick one word to represent their top priority if they are elected.

Council Member Vivian Sanchez-Jones answered with transparency, Republican Amanda Marko with prosperity, independents Kathy Cohen with schools, Stephanie Moon Reynolds with budget, and David Bowers with rezoning. Democrats Raekwon Moore went with education, and Danny Clawson with housing.

Voters will choose three of these seven candidates for four-year seats in the Nov. 3 general election. Early voting starts Sept. 18. Moore, Clawson and Sanchez-Jones [made it through](#) the Democratic primary earlier this month.

How to increase city revenue

Moderator Teresa Mastrangelo also asked candidates to pick one word to describe where they would look for additional revenue. Clawson, who answered with increasing housing density, said getting more middle-wage earners into the city to boost the tax base is key.

"You can either increase taxes towards individuals, or you can increase the number of individuals and taxpayers in the city," Clawson said. "We have had a stable, I would say, stagnant population of 100,000 people for 50 years. Stagnation is the opposite of growth."



David Bowers speaks at a candidate forum in Greater Deyerle on Thursday evening.

Bowers, who served four terms as mayor, answered "cut" when asked where he would look for new revenue.

"We need to make sure that we start taking care of things we have now," Bowers said. "Take care of what we need to take care of now instead of moving into all these very nice new programs."

What to change about city government

Candidates were asked for one thing they would change about how the city government operates. Sanchez-Jones again emphasized the need for transparency.



Roanoke City Council member Vivian Sanchez-Jones speaks at a candidate forum on Thursday evening.

"I think we need to, whenever we have a decision that is being made, to fully have the community input," she said.

Moon Reynolds said the city needs to do a better job of listening to residents.

"I think we have forgotten about who is important," she said. "The residents are the ones who vote for us, who put us in office, and I think council as well as the administration needs to understand that the community's voice is important."



Roanoke City Council candidate Raekwon Moore speaks at a candidate forum on Thursday evening.

Moore said the city should work to attract graduates from nearby colleges to help fill vacancies and look at the job listing requirements in perennially understaffed departments to see if anything can be adjusted.

"We have too many educational opportunities for us to have so many vacancies in our city government," he said. "I think we have a real opportunity there to fix a problem that would create an enormous positive change in Roanoke city."

Candidates talk Flock, school funding

Mastrangelo also asked candidates about the balance between public safety and privacy in reference to the city's use of Flock cameras. Marko, Moon Reynolds, Moore, Clawson, Cohen and Bowers all spoke negatively about the law enforcement surveillance cameras.



About 30 people gathered outside Roanoke City Hall on Aug. 17 to protest the city's use of Flock cameras. The automated license plate readers deployed in the city have been the cause of pushback from people concerned about privacy rights and surveillance overreach.

Sanchez-Jones said she supports the use of the cameras in the city, but said she asked the "tough questions" beforehand, including raising concerns about sharing the data with federal immigration enforcement.

Cohen, who is on Roanoke's Gun Violence Prevention Commission, said she eventually came to the conclusion that the city isn't ready to properly use the cameras.



Kathy Cohen speaks at a Roanoke City Council candidate forum on Thursday evening.

"Our state has not properly legislated how they can and cannot be used. The technology is ahead of where we are legally, and that is a huge problem," Cohen said.

Candidates also answered questions about school funding, which has been a hot-button topic recently as the schools dealt with a \$14 million deficit this year amid council changes to the funding formula. Marko said the city needs to rebuild trust in the relationship and establish consistent funding expectations.



Roanoke City Council candidate Amanda Marko speaks at a forum on Thursday evening.

"The schools need flexibility. They need flexibility with that money to be able to spend it over the course of the school year in the time and place that they need it," Marko said. "If it's been allocated to the schools, then they should be allowed to budget that money and spend it as they see fit, and that has been taken away from them."

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