

# Pownal candidates field questions

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POWNAL — Candidates for town office answered questions from residents Friday night in a forum at the elementary school.

Ray Rodrigues moderated the forum, asking candidates for the School Board, Select Board and town constable a question, then opening it up to the audience.

For the select board, which has four vying for two open one-year seats, many questions involved the town budget and the economy. Rodrigues asked the candidates what they would do to keep the budget under control.

Ronald Bisson, who served on the board until two years ago, said he was a conservative and not one for spending much money. Michael Gardner Jr., who served on the School Board for seven years, said he would work to have more accountability in the town's spending and increase the tax base by encouraging higher scale housing.

Stephen Kauppi, an incumbent board member with four years experience, said with the economy being what it is, the best the town can do is cut costs where it can and keep an eye out for opportunities.

Neal Krawczyk, another incumbent board candidate, was not present at the meeting due to illness, but he sent a letter which Rodrigues read aloud, stating he is in favor of creating something akin to a Pownal chamber of commerce to promote business.

Asked where they felt cuts to the town budget could be made, Bisson and Gardner said making cuts to the budget is extremely difficult, but if it had to be done, it would probably fall under roads. Bisson said overtime might be cut, as could spending on gravel.

Gardner said he would favor a move to a four-day week for the road crew, with highway personnel working 10-hour days. The full number of hours wouldn't change, he said, but he believed that more could be done in a 10-hour day and there would be less moving of equipment.

Kauppi said road maintenance has to be kept up, and while the numbers haven't been made available, he said the town should keep an eye out for federal stimulus money to use on some of its pending projects.

School board

Rodrigues also asked the two School Board candidates present what they would do to control costs. Randy Monhollen and Marilyn Gardner were present at the forum. Angie Rawling did not attend. There are two open school board seats with three candidates. Rawling and Gardner are the two incumbents.

Gardner said the school should cut back on some of its personnel. She said it was a hard thing to do, but said she had read figures stating Vermont has had a 10 percent drop in student enrollment, but a 22 percent increase in teaching staff. When asked for specifics from audience members, Gardner said she would consider cutting para-educator positions, whose jobs she said can be done by the regular teaching staff.

Gardner, who said she works as a driver for Dufour Transportation, a busing company, added that the school should also examine its busing system.

Monhollen said he was not in favor of cutting staff members and said many are needed at the school. He said if elected, he would keep an eye on where the school's money is being spent and cut where possible. When asked what he would do to handle state mandates, he said he would be in favor of letting the state know how the town feels about the mandates, if not attempting to negotiate for less mandates altogether.

Neither Monhollen or Gardner was in favor of consolidating Pownal with other schools, each saying local control is important and a small board is often more effective.

#### Constable

All four candidates running for town constable were present. Each was asked what their main issue with Pownal was and what their qualifications were.

Dave Sorel said drugs are his main concern. He said he didn't want his three children growing up in a town with drug problems and would spend his patrol time dealing with the issues. Sorel said he would also do more patrol work along the Route 7 corridor, which he said he doesn't see much of anymore.

Jody Kocsis said he would pay attention to speeding issues, especially in regards to ATVs. He said much of law enforcement involved educating children at a young age about proper behavior. Kocsis said he has been an EMT on the Bennington Rescue Squad for seven years and a member of the Pownal Fire Department for 10 years; he also serves as president of the Pownal Fire Protection Association.

Andrew Weber said he would like to see the role of constable have more of a first-responder aspect to it, with the State Police barracks being located in Shaftsbury. He said he would use the part-time position as effectively as he could to meet the town's needs.

Weber said he served in the Marine Corps for four years before becoming an armed security guard at the Yankee Rowe Nuclear Power Plant, where he learned a number of handcuffing and mace techniques.

Albert LaFontaine has been the town's constable for the last 10 months. He was appointed to fill the position when it was left vacant by Joel Howard. LaFontaine said he has been a certified police officer since 2003 and worked in law enforcement in Williamstown, Mass. as well as Clarksburgh, Mass. He said he is certified in the use of radar and dispatch work.

The question of how long would it take the candidates without police training to become certified well enough to be the town's constable. Each newcomer said about a month, but LaFontaine disagreed, saying it was closer to six. He said that due to liability issues, a constable had to be completely certified before going out on any kind of patrol, even if it was just to follow a school bus to make sure people obeyed the bus' lights.

Pownal's town meeting begins on March 2 at 7:30 p.m. at the Pownal Elementary School for the floor meeting to vote on Articles 1-3. Articles 4-25 will be voted on by Australian ballot at the Pownal Center Firehouse with polls opening at 7 a.m. and closing at 7 p.m. Article 4 is the election of town officers.

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