



East End Improvement Association hosts Alton mayoral candidate forum

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WATCH THE EAST END IMPROVEMENT ASSOCIATION MAYORAL FORUM
HERE:

ALTON - The East End Improvement Association (EEIA) hosted a mayoral candidate forum at the conference center at the Atrium Hotel.

Following introductions and small three-minute speeches from each of the people running for position of alder people, moderator Steve Schwartz introduced the four mayoral candidates, giving them each three minutes to introduce themselves. Time was kept by a colored spotlight, with green meaning the candidate had full time to answer, yellow meaning they had 30 seconds remaining and red meaning their time had concluded.

After introductions, candidates were asked six questions sourced from the audience and screened by an impartial panel provided by the EEIA. The order of the candidates changed with each chance to respond. They were allowed to introduce themselves in alphabetical order.

Introductions

Scott Dixon (SD): Dixon promised to give Alton a change in its direction. He said he has seen it suffering under the administration of Walker, and has volunteered for decades to make Alton better - saying again he has Alton in his blood.

He said he has a master's in business administration - a degree which would assist Alton's worst problems, which he said were financial in nature.

Dixon also addressed a criticism he has received saying he is "too friendly," defending himself by saying the "very best leaders are tough and likable." He said he researched several river towns similar to Alton, which have gotten better since the Rust Belt began to trend.

Alton under his administration, he said, would work with schools, have better ordinance and code enforcement and would reconnect with the Mississippi River in a similar style to Grafton. He said trust and ethics would be cornerstones of his administration as well. He supported "sustainable progress" and the current community policing initiative.

Updating the city's current two-decade-old plan is also a part of his initiative. He said he wants Alton to have a new plan featuring plenty of input from its citizens. He said he would address inequality as well as infrastructure, while bringing jobs to the city.

He said he was "sick of random projects," saying Alton should be a part of the national rebound from the Great Recession of 2008. He said, despite recent struggles, Alton could still be a better place.

Dan Rauschkolb (DR): Raushkolb said he was 46, and moved to Alton to be a police officer 22 years ago with his wife and their two children. He said he worked his way through the Alton Police Department, where he is now a shift commander at the rank of lieutenant. He said he decided to run, because his wife said he would be the most qualified candidate for the job.

He said Alton needed to create jobs, fix deteriorating roads and make a future for its children, so it could retain its "best and brightest" after high school. He said he would do this by creating a jobs task force and bringing high-tech companies to Alton. He hoped to build a technology and biotech district within the city as well. He said he would reduce start-up fees and "cut red tape" preventing new businesses from coming to Alton and current businesses from growing.

Drugs are another problem Rauschkolb said was plaguing Alton. If elected, he promised to create a heroin task force and work with both state and federal authorities to help rid Alton of its drug offenders. He also said he would work toward creating a community center to give children a place to go after school to take part in productive activities, instead of at-risk youth being vulnerable in the streets.

He said the spelling of his name was not important for the write-in vote to be counted, but it would be "greatly appreciated."

Brant Walker (BW): Walker touted the city's current improvements. He said the city has become safer and more prosperous under his watch, but it still had a lot of room to grow, saying there was still work to be done.

Walker said he has overseen 200 new businesses opening doors in Alton, adding he created a business retention program, which has helped more than 130 local businesses stay in Alton. He showcased more than \$56 million in investments in Alton through building permits as well as a 5.8 percent overall decrease in crime in Alton under his administration when compared to the previous one. He also spoke about the community policing model started under his administration and the \$1.2 million in grants the city received to improve Killion, Riverview, Rock Springs and Gordon Moore parks.

The amphitheater was also used by Walker to show his administration's successes. He said thousands of people have come to Alton to see national acts hosted at the amphitheater, which he said generated as much as \$3 million for the local economy.

When he first took office, Walker said the city did not even have a street sweeper. Walker said he was able to secure one under a very tight budget. He said he was able to get several other pieces of equipment as well to improve infrastructure.

Natural disasters have also played a crucial role in Walker's administration. He said he has witnessed four of the 10 worst floods in Alton's history, including weather conditions from Dec. 2015-Jan. 2016 in which a wall 1,000 feet long was built by the Alton Public Works Department and the citizens of Alton to save Downtown Alton from flooding.

Joshua Young (JY): Young said he had "a very earnest desire to serve." He said he was born and raised in Alton, where he stayed before leaving for the United States Marine Corps, where he served in administrative and legal capacities. He said he worked in several wings of the corps, and was mentored by high-ranking officers and generals. He said he learned different levels of work and teamwork through his time as a Marine.

His campaign, he said, is based on the Progressive Movement, made popular by such politicians, including former presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Barrack Obama as well as former presidential candidate Bernie Sanders. He said he would follow that template if he were elected. Under that template, he said he would help the underprivileged, and work to increase the purchasing power and capacity of everyone.

He worked as a precinct committeeman in the Fourth Ward. He said Alton needed more innovative techniques to reflect its diverse demographics. He said he applied for designation of portions of the Fourth Ward as a historical district, adding such a designation would be the first of its kind for African Americans in Alton.

Young promised he would continue to work toward Alton's progress for all of its citizens, even if he were not to be elected.

Question One: Do you support the new Alton Fire Department Ambulance Service? Why or why not?

SD: Dixon said he worked with a budget half the size of the city's when he worked at Dixon Distributing. He said during that time, he took a pragmatic approach. He said the service is "great if it does help," but he still had too many questions about it to have an opinion yet. He said he wanted to "give it a fair shake." He said it should be discontinued if it does not support the city.

DR: Rauschkolb said such a service was voted down by the city 10 years ago, and said he was disappointed it could not have been taken to a vote again. He said he was not sure if it was a success or failure, but said he fully supported both Alton Memorial and Lifestar ambulance services, warning he did not think it would be in the city's best interests to compete directly with two of its best employers. He said those services should have first priority with calls, with the Alton Fire Department responding after the other ambulances arrived on scene.

BW: Walker said he fully supported it. He said he assigned each of his department heads with a way to generate revenue for the city upon taking office, and Alton Fire Chief Bernie Sebold researched the Alton Fire Department having an ambulance for three years, saying it was a well-vetted plan. Walker said EMTs and paramedics from the fire department were already doing the work of paramedics with ambulances, and in many cases, Walker said the fire department was responding first. He said the city was doing the work without receiving revenue from it. Transporting patients to area hospitals is a billable service, and Walker said 70 percent of the revenue generated from the ambulance service goes to help fund pension liabilities, which are among the worst looming debts the city has.

JY: Young said he "definitely supported" the ambulance. He said Sebold does a "wonderful job" as chief, and he agrees with Walker. He said Sebold approached him to lobby for the ambulance plan in the Fourth Ward as a social advocate. Young said he did so, because he believed the ambulance plan would be best for the city. He also hoped more young people could pursue careers with the Alton Fire Department, despite the fact the city did not hire additional personnel to staff that ambulance.

Question Two: If elected mayor, what plans or strategies would you do to bring in more small businesses?

DR: Rauschkolb described small businesses as a "necessity" for Alton. He said he would help make districts for businesses, and stop other nearby communities from "swooping them up." He said he would make sure the city worked with new businesses and provided grants and tax incentives, and bring people with knowledge and know-how to provide a good workforce.

BW: Walker said he would continue to do it by pushing for more and better infrastructure. He said as much as 80 percent of new jobs would come from small businesses. He said he is on the phone every day trying to bring new small businesses and maintain the businesses currently inside of Alton. He said he has lowered unemployment in Alton from 11.6 percent to 7.1 percent under his administration and has improved retail sales from the worst point they have been at in decades to the highest amount since 2008. He said he was excited to develop the 30 acres around the multi-modal train station coming to the area as well.

JY: Young said he believed in the people. He said he would continue the work already being done, and focus on business incubators. He said he would reach out to Alton's many demographics with "advocacy," and help create "subeconomies," by giving small businesses incentives to pay workers living wages. He said this would help increase the

purchasing capacity of all demographics. He said he would continue what Walker was doing, but also create ways to "open doors to dreamers," promising, "if you can think it, the city will help you make it real."

SD: Dixon said to attract new businesses, Alton needed to show small business owners where it is going. He said he would make sure he updated the city's current plan. He disagreed with Walker about businesses growing in Alton, saying instead too many were shutting their doors. He said he would reach out to St. Louis and other communities in the Metro East to bring businesses while focusing on Alton's appeal. Dixon said, "we don't want to bribe people to come somewhere they don't want to be."

Question Three: How would you work to keep businesses in Alton?

BW: Walker said Dixon's idea to renew the city's plan would cost taxpayers between \$100,000-\$200,000 and would take as long as two years. Walker promised he would continue with his business retention visits and will continuously ask businesses how they could partner better with the city. He touted the issuance of more than 200 business licenses under his administration. He also said he keeps a database of available commercial sites, which is viewed on 17 other sites, many of which are out of state.

JY: Young said he would work with advocacy and TIF districts to retain small business, and promised he would help them grow from small mom and pop ventures into larger businesses. He said Schwegels is a good example of such a local business. He said he would offset the city's current energy costs through efforts of renewable energy, such as solar-powered streetlights and wind power from the Great River Road, and use those savings to assist local businesses. He said his efforts would not only make it easier for businesses to grow, but would also help them pay citizens a living wage.

SD: Dixon said Alton had to work on keeping businesses in the areas. He said the majority of new jobs would come from the expansion of existing small businesses, but said the city definitely needs a plan to move forward. He admitted the creation of a new plan would be costly to taxpayers, but said it would be worth it to have a plan for the future created by Alton's citizens.

DR: Rauschkolb said businesses needed two simple things: profit and feeling like family. He said Alton needed citizens with disposable income, which would be achieved by bringing high-paying jobs to Alton through lowering fees and eliminating red tape. He said small businesses had enough problems without the city getting in the way.

Question Four: Do you plan on privatizing or contracting out work currently being done by city employees?

JY: Young said he "believed in the people of Alton," saying he believed in homegrown people creating new industry and jobs. He said people have the answers themselves, and to grow economics, the city must believe in its people. "Everybody in, no pay to play," he said.

SD: Dixon said he would "prefer not to privatize if it can be helped." He said his job would be a good steward of taxpayers' money, adding he did not want to put people out of jobs. He said he would work with department heads to find ways to cut costs. Dixon promised transparency in city bidding if elected with good competition at lowest prices. He also said he would work to stop the decreasing population in Alton, which would bring more businesses and revenue to the city.

DR: Rauschkolb said privatizing departments rarely saves much money. He said he would not like to see taxpayers' money leave Alton, preferring instead to keep money within Alton.

BW: Walker said he did not support privatization, claiming he never had and never will. He said work goes out to bid only when a job is too big for the city's employees to handle on their own. He said Alton did not become great by outsourcing, adding outsourcing is not his policy.

Question Five: Will funding for animal control be at risk if you are elected?

SD: Dixon said he would keep as many city services as he could. He said animal control was essential, saying he has utilized it himself when a dog was threatening him and his dog. He citizens feeling safe and secure was essential to a city.

DR: He said animal control is one of the most important departments in the city. He said Alton "has more pets than people." Rauschkolb said he would even look into expanding the hours for animal control.

BW: Walker said he would keep animal control, saying it was a "critical service" to keep within the budget.

JY: Young said he "believed in all city services," saying each should be kept.

Question Six: Why do you want to be the mayor of a city with such financial challenges?

DR: Rauschkolb said he was not from Alton, but has spent 22 years in the city. He said he would like to see it have a bright future with more industry, saying the city would fix itself under the right guidance. He said he would ensure Alton continued to do what it

takes to succeed, assuring it could soon be the best city in Southern Illinois, adding it was only a matter of desire.

BW: Walker said he loves his job and being mayor has been an honor for him. He said he moved to Alton nearly 30 years ago, and said he has been raising his daughter in a city he has watched become stagnant. He opened a business in the Fourth Ward - inside of a depressed area in Alton - and hired 300 employees there. He also manages 15 rental properties and said he has worked with tight budgets in many of those areas in his life. He said the progress is not stopping, and his administration has worked to fund many of the pension debts, which he said had not been funded for as long as 30 years previous to his administration. He said he would continue to work to make the city better, even if it must be done with a tight budget.

JY: Young said he was born with challenges. He said he understands them, and has lived through them. He said he sees people throughout Alton deal with challenges every day. He said he believed in the people, and would work to reduce energy costs. He said he would draw inspiration from single mothers working two jobs to support their families on minimum wage to manage the city's finances. He said those people need to have the podium, so they can share how they come together and make due with so little. Win or lose, Young promised to continue to work for the people of Alton.

SD: Dixon said he could "challenge anybody for how much they love this city." he said he loves Alton and finds how much its citizens love it to be inspiring. He said he has learned so much from the people of Alton through meeting with them, hearing several real stories behind statistics. He said he would refuse health care and pension from the city, which he said would save the city thousands. He chastised the \$11,000 hotel feasibility study championed by the current administration, saying he knew the banks would not approve it before the banks themselves said that. He also warned of a looming threat of an unfunded sewer separation mandate, estimated at \$50 million in costs. Without a proper administrator, he said that issue would require bonds, which could cost the taxpayers an additional \$80 million in debt over the next coming decades.