



Candidates Answer Questions During Open Forum At Alton YWCA

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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ALTON - The candidates for County Board Chairman, State's Attorney and Circuit Clerk all discussed their qualifications and answered voters' questions during a Candidates Forum presented by the Alton YWCA.

The candidates introduced themselves to the audience and talked about why they feel they are the best candidate for their offices, and how they would run their offices and what sets them apart from their opponents. In her introductory remarks, YWCA Executive Director Dorothy Hummel talked about her experience as both a member of the Edwardsville City Council and School Board, her work with the YWCA, its importance to the community and how important it is for voters to participate in elections.

"Participating in the electoral process through voting is one way to shape the policies and laws that affect our everyday lives," Hummel said. "Being on a board or commission can be a wonderful and enlightening experience. Holding public office and serving one's community is both a privilege and true responsibility."

Hummel also cited the recent deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, among others, along with the protests against police brutality and racism, along with the COVID-19 pandemic and other issues, as very challenging times for the local community, and emphasized that local elections are also important and help shape the future of Madison County.

"Local elections are important," Hummel said. "Decisions made by local governments and elected officials truly have an effect on our daily lives."

Hummel then explained the responsibilities of the offices the candidates are running for, and thanked the sponsoring organizations and the candidates for putting their names on the ballot and running for their offices.

In the State's Attorney's race, Democratic candidate Crystal Uhe, currently the first assistant attorney, started her career as a file clerk in 2005, and worked her way up to her current position, serving as a prosecutor in the violent crimes division. She has helped to prosecute over 50 murder cases, numerous sexual assault cases, and supervised an office of 32 attorneys and 20 support staffers, along with supervising the treatment, mental health and veterans' courts, was part of the elder abuse initiative, and the domestic violence accountability court.

Uhe talked about her passion for fighting for crime victims in Madison County, and if elected, would be the first woman ever to hold the State's Attorney's office.

"Once elected, not only will I be the first female State's Attorney," Uhe said, "but the most experienced trial attorney to ever hold this position.

Her opponent, Republican Tom Haine, an Alton native and son of former State's Attorney and state Senator Bill Haine, talked about his passion to make his community's future better and safer, feeling the best way to do that is to making sure that crime doesn't gain a foothold in the county.

"I feel a passion to make our future, our community's future, better, safer," Haine said. "And the best way to do that is through that crime never gains a hold in our community, making sure that every neighborhood safer tomorrow that it is today."

Haine also talked about his military experience, becoming a military prosecutor, taking cases in both the military and Federal court systems.

"So I know what it means to bring a case to trial," Haine said, "and to put the bad guys away. And that's the fundamental job of the State's Attorney, and that's where I'll keep a laser focus. We need to make sure we have safe communities, and that involves aggressive, but fair, prosecution of crimes in Madison County."

Haine also said that he wants to serve his home and hometown, wanting to make the community better for his children and the residents of Alton.

The candidates then took voters' questions on topics ranging from school-to-prison pipelines, second chance expungement programs, and how the candidates would be fair in sentencing convicted criminals, especially with first-time offenders, among other issues. Both candidates pledged fairness in the running of their office.

In the Circuit Clerk's race, Republican Tom McRae will face Democrat Amy Gabriel. McRae currently represents District 14 on the Madison County Board, while Gabriel is an Associate Attorney at the Gori Julian law firm in Edwardsville.

McRae is using his experience in both life and the public sector as his strengths in running for the office, while Gabriel feels her expertise in the courthouse is her strong point in her candidacy.

Gabriel feels that her 20 years experience as an attorney, working civil and criminal cases, along with her knowledge of the Madison County court system, makes her the best candidate for Circuit Clerk.

"The Circuit Clerks and the Deputy Clerks are in charge of the business of the courthouse," Gabriel said. "All of the legal filings, all the fees and fines, that's what the Circuit Clerk is in charge of. And I believe it takes someone who's been in that courthouse, who lives in that courthouse, who's worked with the judges and attorneys and the clerks. And most importantly, the community who comes into that courthouse every day, that's why I believe I am the one with the knowledge and the experience to be your Circuit Clerk."

In the question-and-answer session, the candidates were asked how they would hire more workers of color to promote a more equal and diverse workforce in the office. Gabriel feels that the equity issue is something that needs to keep being discussed and acted upon.

"Certainly, it was talked about with our State's Attorney candidates," Gabriel said, "and it's something we need to keep talking about, and that's about the issue of equity. And race is certainly one of those considerations, but as your Circuit Clerk, I want to tell you that my focus will be on an equitable court, on an equitable system that all of our community, for every person that walks into those courthouse doors, to make sure that they're treated fairly, that they're given the help that they need, and that they're given respect. And that's for race, that's for sex, that's for sexual orientation, that's for ability. All of those things mean we need to have equitable local government."

Gabriel pledged to have more people of color hired to work in the office, along with a Spanish-speaking member of her staff to help those in need.

McRae agreed with Gabriel's point that there needs to be more diversity in the Circuit Clerk's office.

"That's an excellent question, and I think Amy made a good point," McRae said. There's 81 employees in the Circuit Clerk's office, and only six are African-American. And I think we can do better than that. We should do better than that. In fact, today, I was on a WebX about diversity in the workplace. And I think we all need to make sure and embrace diversity with males, females, black, white. Because everybody brings something to the table. And I think we need to make sure that we're giving everybody every opportunity to excel. And I think we sure value other people's opinions and their perspective. And by having that diversity, you only enhance the workplace, and you enhance the experience for everybody that's involved."

McRae made a commitment to make sure his workers have an equal chance in the hiring process, and feels it's incredibly important to have diversity.

Democratic County Board Chairman candidate Bob Daiber, from Marine, is a former Regional Superintendent of Schools for Madison County, and is running because he feels that the region needs true leadership and regional leadership that brings people together.

"I have served in the capacity of Village Trustee, a Township Supervisor, I served on the County Board," Daiber said, "where we did some really big things, like the America's Central report, like the McKinley Bridge project, getting the Gateway Commerce Center, and building Governor's Parkway in Edwardsville. And we can do big things again in this community, because there's so much potential in Madison County. But it takes true leadership, and it takes an initiative to want to get things done, and to include communities, and to work with mayors, and to work with Township Supervisors to help people, and to move this county forward."

Republican candidate and current County Board chairman Kurt Prenzler was also invited, but could not attend.

[Charles Thomas also contributed to this story.](#)