

Supervisor Candidates Meet in First Forum

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The Loudoun Farm Bureau and Loudoun County Equine Alliance kicked off the 2023 election season's crowded schedule of candidate forums and debates with a discussion focused on rural and agricultural issues Wednesday evening at Leesburg's Ida Lee Park Recreation Center.

Seven candidates, all but one vying to represent Loudoun's rural west, took part. They included at-large incumbent Chair Phyllis J. Randall (D-At Large), her Republican challenger Stephen Karbelk and independent Sam Kroiz; incumbent



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Candidates for Board of Supervisors take part in an Aug. 9 forum at the Ida Lee Park Recreation Center, organized and hosted by the Loudoun Farm Bureau and the Loudoun County Equine Alliance.

Candidate forum

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Catoctin District Supervisor Caleb E. Kershner (R) and his independent challenger John Ellis; Little River District Democratic candidate Laura TeKrony, and incumbent Board Run District Supervisor Sylvia R. Glass (D), the sole candidate in an eastern district to take part. One candidate in a western district, Republican Little River District nominee Ram Venkatachalam, did not attend, nor did Glass's Republican opponent Michelle Suttler.

"The strength and generosity of Loudoun County lies in its people. But the uniqueness of our county really does lie in our land and our land use," Randall said.

"I believe that you have the ability to make the right decisions about your land, and that you do not need to have some 30-something staffer in Leesburg, tell you what to do or try to solve a problem that hasn't happened yet," Karbelk said.

"My kids want to be farmers one day, and then the next day they want to be a policeman or a doctor or a teacher, so I'm not counting on it. But I want it at least to be an opportunity," Kroiz, who owns and farms Georges Mill Farm, said.

All three candidates in the race for county chair agreed on protecting un-paved rural roads.

"Just like people who live near airports might hear an airplane, and people who live in the western area might hear a cow, if you move into a rural area and on a rural road, you're on a rural road," Randall said.

"My inclination is to not pave any of the roads unless the landowners come to the county and petition to say they really want the road to be paved," Karbelk said.

Kroiz said the threat to rural roads is a lack of maintenance. "You get into this situation where it's a binary choice between paving or having terribly maintained roads," he said.

But they often had different ideas on how to protect the county's rural reaches and agricultural businesses, and how to better support those businesses.

"There was a time when we had somebody in the Department of Economic Development to focus solely on western Loudoun County. Since she left, things have changed, and not for the better," Randall said. She said she will encourage the department to add that position back to their staff.

"We should defer to the state agencies that already regulate alcohol and food-

based businesses, and I also believe that the owner operators are going to make prudent decisions and that we should just understand they're making significant capital investments and that they're not going to want to be or to do anything that's going to affect that," Karbelk said.

"The biggest thing to me isn't so much what the county can do to help, as just can they just please stop hurting so much," Kroiz said. As an example, he pointed to the ongoing work to rewrite the county's cluster zoning rules.

"Farming doesn't even need to be the enemy of development. It only is because of the rules that we have for development," Kroiz said. He said current zoning rules allow too dense of development, and pointed to the concern that cluster zoning rules, meant to preserve more rural homes close together, end up encouraging that development to concentrate on the best farmland—which is also the best land for septic fields.

"We're losing all this farmland with the status quo. We've been losing it for the last two terms and even before that. So the balance really is between people's rights to use their property, how they want to, and the effect that has on the other neighbors," Kroiz said.

And they disagreed on whether the current Board of Supervisors needs to finish years of work writing a new zoning ordinance before the end of its term.

Randall pointed out the new zoning ordinance is meant to implement the vision of the 2019 comprehensive plan. "It is important to get this done because the comp plan and the zoning ordinance are out of alignment, and whenever you have the two documents that structure how your land should be used out of alignment, that just creates a lot of confusion," Randall said.

Karbelk argued instead to further delay the ordinance into next term. "I don't think that just because two documents are out of the alignment is a reason to rush it. Protecting property rights is very important," Karbelk said.

In the Catoctin District, Kershner pointed to the work so far and more work he plans to do, while Ellis pointed to the continued loss of farmland and green spaces happening nonetheless.

Previously, they have disagreed on the ongoing effort to amend cluster zoning, with Kershner arguing reducing development density would discourage conservation easements by reducing the tax incentive.

"We must protect conservation ease-

ments, which have permanently preserved 80,000 acres in the last 20 years, and introduce other tools to the toolbox like TDRs [transfer of development rights] and PDRs [purchase of development rights]," he said. He pointed out that downzoning may not be permanent—a future board of supervisors could amend the zoning ordinance to once again allow more density.

He pointed to Prince William County, where the Board of Supervisors recently voted to rezone thousands of acres of agricultural land for data center development.

Meanwhile, Ellis has pointed out that keeping the zoning ordinance's current density also encourages more development.

"The biggest problem that we have in western Loudoun right now is just too much development, including residential development. We're running out of areas where we can actually preserve land because development is going on so fast. You just need to go down [Rt.] 287 or Rt. 15 to see that," he said. He has argued for down-zoning the west.

"We cannot afford to put 10,000 more houses in western Loudoun and expect to have trails and everything else here, we just can't do that. So we need other solutions," he said.

But both agreed the county needs a range of tools to preserve western Loudoun. Kershner proposed reversing this year's five-cent cut to the personal property tax rate and funneling the revenue from data centers into funding a purchase of development rights program, although both agreed PDRs are one tool rather than a total solution. And they, too, agreed that poor maintenance by the state threatens Loudoun's unpaved rural roads.

Kershner announced he is developing proposals to create a new county Department of Agriculture and for a biennial local census of agriculture, supplementing the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Census of Agriculture, which occurs every five years.

"I'm not persuaded that we need more bureaucracy in the county government to support agriculture, but we do need to create a playing field that our farmers can succeed on," Ellis said. He said local farms need local business investment.

"Our farms are facing a lot of severe operational challenges, including over-development and traffic that they have to deal with. But also, one of the issues that I've heard quite a bit about is we need local packaging and processing facilities, which are available in neighboring jurisdictions and have been discussed for a number of years here, but we have not made progress

on that," he said.

TeKrony said she does not believe the county has achieved balance in its land use planning, pointing to complaints from some western residents about neighboring businesses.

"It's about balance. I want the rural economy to be successful, but I want neighboring residents to have a high quality of life. And I believe we need to consider the intensity and scale of the use to determine if it fits into the character of western Loudoun," she said.

TeKrony said she sees the county's Transition Policy Area, which divides the eastern Suburban Policy Area from the western Rural Policy Area, as a central reserve where the county can establish parks, trails and other facilities. And she said the county should smooth the path for landowners to lease land to farmers, including drawing up a model farm lease to make those agreements easier.

"We need to provide public information to holders of land acreage about the benefits of leasing," she said. And she said the county should expand on the model of the New Ag School, the program at Fabboli Cellars training people to work in agribusines.

"I think we need to provide training for farmers—for new farmers, young farmers, minority farmers," she said.

"One of the things that we also need to do is to talk to our farmers, talk to people who are in the agriculture business, and let us know what you all need," Glass said.

"I can say 'yes, I think you need this, and this, and this; but if it's not what you need, then it doesn't help."

And she said there is a need to protect green spaces in eastern Loudoun as well, saying PDRs could also be used to protect eastern land.

"I'm also concerned about the eastern part of Loudoun, because we do have a lot of development and we are losing open spaces in the eastern part of Loudoun as well," she said.

This year's November election includes 33 county-level or higher offices, including all nine seats on both the Board of Supervisors and School Board, all five local constitutional officers, all five of Loudoun's House of Delegates districts, both state Senate districts, and three Soil and Water Conservation Board seats. There are 70 candidates across those races. Several of Loudoun's towns are also holding town council elections this November. ■