

'I was set up.' Lakeland mayoral candidate takes heat from Black community at debate

L theledger.com/story/news/politics/elections/2021/10/13/polk-county-mayor-candidate-saga-stevin-says-set-up-naacp-debate/6042424001

In an Oct. 6 interview posted online, Stevin called Black Lives Matter a "Marxist organization." At a debate Tuesday, she denied saying that.

Dustin Wyatt
The Ledger



After saying in recent interviews and at local functions that she doesn't support Black Lives Matter, body cameras or the removal of Confederate memorials from public spaces, Lakeland mayoral candidate Saga Stevin found herself on the hot seat during a debate Tuesday night hosted by the local chapter of the NAACP.

The debate featured six candidates vying for three spots on the Lakeland City Commission, including three incumbents. During the final hour, audience members were given the chance to take a microphone and ask questions to a candidate of their choice.

Nearly all of them directed their comments and inquiries at Stevin, a political newcomer who recently moved back to her hometown from Minnesota.

Previously:Political newcomer and incumbent to face off in Lakeland mayoral election

For nearly an hour, Stevin attempted to win over Black voters while faced with a steady stream of criticism.

“I am 100% on your side,” and “I have a lot of relationships with a lot of people, all different cultures,” and “I don’t see color,” she said at different points.

“I’m walking with you, hand-in-hand,” she added. “I’m a voice for you. I want to help you and lift you up.”

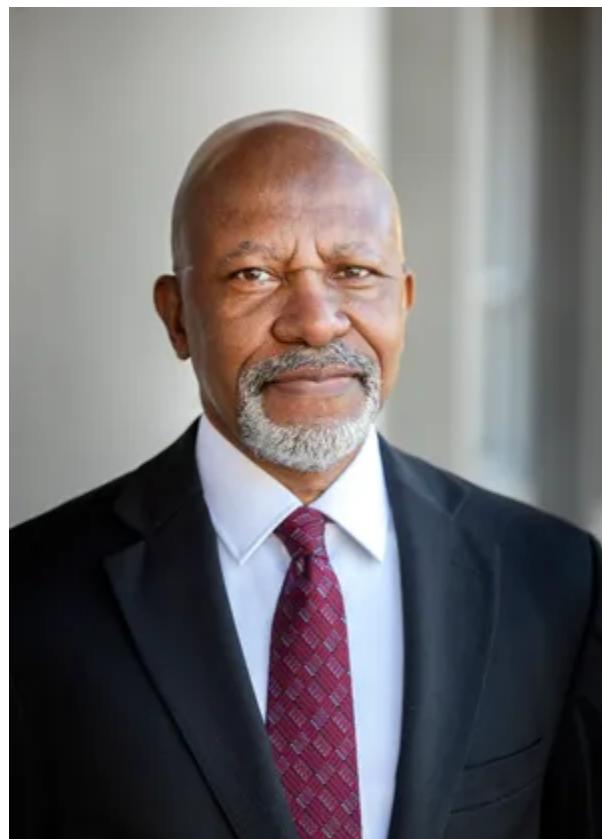
But a day later, when contacted by a Ledger reporter about the debate, she said she was treated unfairly at the event.

“That wasn’t a debate,” she said in a phone call. “I was set up.”

By the way:Mike Musick, Shandale Terrell face off again for Lakeland's SE District

And:Allyson Lewis challenges Sara Roberts McCarley to represent SW District

A 'rough' night for Saga Stevin



It wasn't designed to be a set up, said Terry Coney, president of the Lakeland chapter of the NAACP, adding that the group's City Commission debates are always handled in a similar fashion.

Coney also said that the debates are designed to be nonpartisan. The group doesn't endorse one candidate over another, he added.

He said Black residents just aren't happy with things Stevin has stated during her campaign and used the forum as an opportunity to voice their concerns and gain a better understanding of her viewpoints.

"It wasn't set up for everyone to jump on her," Coney said. "I felt bad that it immediately turned toward her."



Mayor Bill Mutz, who's facing off against Stevin in the Nov. 2 election, disagrees with his opponent on many local issues that were highlighted at the debate.

But Mutz said he agrees that the format of the debate could have been structured differently. He suggested that the moderator field written questions from the audience, instead of letting people in attendance say whatever they wanted.

"I thought it was rough," Mutz told The Ledger. "I understand her frustration. I have a great deal of empathy."

Stevin calls Black Lives Matter 'Marxist organization.' Denies saying it

Regardless of the format, if Stevin was hoping to use Tuesday night's forum to win votes from Black Lakeland voters, she failed, Coney said.

"I don't think it went very well," he said.

At one point, Jarvis Washington, the leader of Black Lives Matter Restoration Polk, challenged Stevin to explain her position on the movement, saying that she'd referred to it as a "Marxist organization" in past interviews.

Washington asked Stevin if she had proof that the local group, unaffiliated with the national Black Lives Matter organization, is linked to Marxism.

Stevin denied using that language. "I don't believe I've ever said any of that, so no."

In an Oct. 6 interview with County Citizens Defending Freedom posted on the website Rumble, Stevin mentioned "the destruction" of Minneapolis by Black Lives Matter protesters following the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer. She called them a "Marxist organization" that is "out to destroy the Black community."

She also referred to them as a "Marxist group" in a Wednesday phone call with The Ledger.

"I very much promote and support Black people and Black lives, but the organization itself I do not support," she said.

Washington said that Stevin doesn't know anything about the local organization, which formed in 2016. He asked at the debate whether she'd ever attended an event, and she didn't provide an answer.

"To think we are trying to destroy the Black community is laughable," he said. "Her not being aware of what's going on in this community is starting to show."

Coney said it's irrelevant for Stevin to bring up the national Black Lives Matter organization and what happened in Minnesota during her local campaign for mayor of Lakeland, a nonpartisan position.

"She's using a national issue for a local race," he said.



Mayoral candidates differ on body cameras, Confederate monuments

Several candidates are hoping to fill or maintain Lakeland City Commission seats on Election Day.

District C Commissioner Sara Roberts McCarley is facing off against Allyson Lewis, an educator in Orange County.

District D Commissioner Mike Musick is being challenged for his seat by Shandale Terrell, a Polk County school teacher.

Other news: Polk County wants to charge residents more for trash collection

While each candidate was given a chance to answer a series of questions by a moderator about their goals and vision at Tuesday's debate, the heat for most of the event was on Stevin.

Stevin said the other candidates were treated with disrespect.

"Here's the sad part: Every candidate was there and they had prepared for this and had taken time out of their evenings to do this, and I thought it was disrespectful to them because they didn't get to say what they wanted to say."

During the event, Stevin was asked about her position on two issues that have been a focal point in Lakeland in recent years: A Confederate statue and body cameras for Lakeland police officers.

Three years ago, a Confederate memorial was moved from Munn Park to Veterans Park at a cost of \$197,000, using funds that were originally dedicated for red light cameras.

Mutz supported the move. Stevin has said she thinks it wasn't handled appropriately.

"If you want to do something like that, it should be a referendum where people vote on it," she said.

She added that while she has no intention of working to move the statue back to Munn Park, she doesn't agree with moving these monuments.

"I don't agree with moving monuments. I believe it's a part of our history; good, bad or indifferent," she said.

Mutz disagrees.

"We supported the move on the commission because this (monument) fires up a lot of emotion with people," he said. "There were some who were upset that it wasn't done as a referendum, but I think the commission felt confident that it wasn't a referendum issue and that it was part of what we were elected to do."

The two mayoral candidates also disagree on body cameras.

Related: Lakeland adopts budget for next year, including higher taxes, body cameras

And: Winter Haven budget includes body cameras, affordable housing, pay increases

By a split vote, the City Commission voted in September on a budget that, for the first time, includes body cameras for its police department. Mutz voted in favor of that change.

For Mutz, it's about better accountability.

"The reason that body cameras are an issue is not because of ineffective policing, it's to create mutual accountability for interactions with the police," he said, adding that the technology can also benefit officers who are accused of wrongdoing.

"In many occasions, (the cameras) can exonerate our police force for things that were alleged to have happened but didn't."

The addition of body cameras will initially cost \$1.1 million in its first year. Stevin said the city should spend its money on other needs.

"Right now, our police need other things; we have tasers that are old," Stevin said Tuesday.

The \$1.1 million allocated for body cameras in the city budget includes new in-car vehicle dashboard cameras and tasers.

Her opinion on cameras is similar to one that's been expressed by Polk County Sheriff Grady Judd as a reason he doesn't want them for his department.

"The other thing people need to realize is that if they (police) have body cameras, every one of us gives up our privacy," she said. "If they come in for a domestic call, you're on candid camera. If you're a witness to a crime, you are on candid camera."

She added, "We have a fabulous police force and they are passionate about this community and they are here to help this community. I don't see Lakeland as a candidate for body cams right now."

Related:Campaign mailer raises questions of Grady Judd's mayoral endorsement

Dustin Wyatt can be reached at dwyatt@gannett.com or on Twitter @LLDustin_Wyatt.