

CANDIDATES FOR CITY COUNCIL, SCHOOL BOARD SOUND CLIMATE ALARMS AT GONZAGA FORUM

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Body

Picture this: It's 2031. Spokane has made many of the **changes** needed to begin addressing issues with **climate change**.

How did we get here?

That was among the questions pertaining to the **climate** crisis asked Wednesday to a handful of candidates running for seats on the Spokane City Council and Spokane Public Schools Board.

This year's **Climate Change** Forum, hosted by Gonzaga University's Center for **Climate**, Society and the Environment, saw participation from three City Council candidates - Naghmana Sherazi, incumbent Councilwoman Betsy Wilkerson and Zack Zappone - and one school board candidate, Riley Smith.

And while the forum used a format similar to that of a presidential debate, the issues saw the candidates - each running in separate races - largely in agreement, as was apparent in their views on the draft sustainability action plan proposed by the City Council's Sustainability Action Subcommittee. The plan calls for the city to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 95% from 2016 levels by 2050.

Sherazi described the action plan as "a really good first stepping stone."

"Ten years from now, I would really like very much to see Spokane as a thriving, inclusive city that has really embraced sustainability and a circular economy," said Sherazi, who is running to represent northeast Spokane on the City Council, "because we can't do anything for our children to be successful unless we start it now."

Sherazi's opponent in the District 1 race, Jonathan Bingle, declined to attend Wednesday's forum, while District 3 candidate Mike Lish did not respond, said moderator Brian Henning, director of the Gonzaga **climate** center. Tyler LeMasters was invited prior to his removal from the District 2 ballot for failing to meet residency requirements.

As for the school board, Kata Dean - Smith's opponent in the race for Position 4 - and Position 3 candidate Melissa Bedford declined to attend, while Bedford's opponent, Daryl Geffken, accepted before withdrawing for unstated reasons, Henning said. He said only candidates who were successful in their respective primaries were invited to the forum.

That left Smith as the lone school board participant. He and the other candidates fielded questions from Henning, as well as those prepared by Wednesday's co-moderators, Gonzaga junior Laurel Burlingame and Lewis and Clark High School senior Will Merritt.

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Asked what role the school board and education might play in helping to curb the climate crisis, Smith said the board should adapt school building infrastructure and foster a climate-focused curriculum.

Smith said the school board should be looking at a phased-in approach to electrifying the system over the next 10 to 20 years.

"The real change for climate change is going to happen in our schools," he said. "It has to start from the bottom up in educating our youth all the way up through our seniors as well."

The forum comes after a summer that saw historically high temperatures in Spokane, including a June heat wave linked with the deaths of 20 county residents.

Zappone, running against Lish for the District 3 seat, said city leaders need to explore and adjust zoning parameters as needed to increase access to public transit and make neighborhoods more walkable. He, as did the other candidates, said it's also important to view that through the lens of historically marginalized communities who are the most impacted.

"The first thing we need to do is study what will be the impact that climate change (has) on our city, on our most impacted communities, and start creating intervention in the ways that we can do that," Zappone said. "But if we don't have a plan, if we haven't studied how that's going to impact our local area and our local region, then we can't take action to prevent it in the future."

Wilkerson said elevating the voices of marginalized community members is why she sought a council seat in the first place.

Seeking her first full term in office after she was appointed to the council last year, Wilkerson is running unopposed after LeMasters was removed from the ballot.

Wilkerson - who stated she is in favor of the draft sustainability action plan - said she would continue to advocate for city response, such as the use of warming and cooling centers, to climate crisis issues if reelected. She said city leaders also need to explore ways to bring trees to "tree deserts," otherwise areas that have less canopy density.

"We have to have this whole holistic approach and be very intentional," she said.

Notes

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