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Lawsuit expenses top issue in campaign

By CARL MARIO NUDI
cnudi@bradenton.com

MANATEE — The looming cost of a lawsuit filed against Trailer Estates Park and Recreational District has become the top issue in Tuesday's election for four seats on the trustees' board.

Eight candidates have qualified for the election and most have said they are running to deal with a lawsuit two park residents filed in November 2008 after repeated requests for public records. The four elected will serve two-year terms.

The district became a governmental body, subject to the state's Sunshine and Open Records laws, when it was established by the Florida Legislature in 1969 as a special taxing district.

The nine-member board of trustees manage a \$1.7 million budget.

The legal expenses have been mounting, and one candidate estimated the mobile home park could be liable for more than \$1 million.

"We've got a financial crisis because of this lawsuit," said Bruce Smith, who said the costs could go as high as \$2 million if it is not settled. "I want to do whatever it takes to stop the bleeding of money."

Smith, who previously served on the board for one term during his 5 1/2 years as a resident of Trailer Estates, said many park residents are on fixed incomes, and the lawsuit could end up costing residents \$1,000 each.

"We need to concentrate on that issue," said the retired General Motors engineer and manager of various businesses. "It's going to take all the talents of everyone on the board" to solve the problem.

Benjamin LaFar, who has lived in the park for nine years, agreed the potential cost of the lawsuit could hurt a lot of residents.

The retired construction business owner said he expects the expenses to continue to climb, but he is not sure what the total costs are.

"There's a lot of misleading information," said LaFar. "It's time to do something to help the people because everyone can't afford all the increases."

For Jim McIlveen, who spent 27 years as a law enforcement officer before becoming a general superintendent of a large construction company, the issue is not about the Sunshine Law, it's about control.

"I want to resolve it as soon as possible because of the costs," said the 11-year park resident.

McIlveen said the district has every amenity a retiree would want, and he will try to keep it an enjoyable place to live.

Beverly Lew, a retired nurse active in civic organizations, said the top issue is education of the residents on the responsibilities of a special district. "The biggest reason why we're where we are is because some thought we were a homeowners' association," said Lew, who has lived in the park for four years.

She said she believes in open government and the board has to follow the law.

Candidate John White said because of the rising costs of paying for lawyers, property values in the park are declining.

"We've used all the rainy day funds," said the retired state park manager from Ohio. "We now have to borrow money to pay for the lawsuit."

White, who built a new home in 2003, said the new board members will have to work to pay off any debts.

“If I get elected, I’ll be only one of nine,” he said, “and at least five have to agree which way to go to cover the debt.”

Pamela Cole, one of the two incumbents seeking reelection to the trustees’ board, could not be reached for comment.

Joe Salerno, the other incumbent, is recovering from an operation and could not be reached for comment.

Candidate Ken Ilg said his attorney advised him not to comment.

Two board members, John Vander Molen and Janet Jones, decided not to seek re-election. The polling station at the Trailer Estates community center, 1903 69th Ave. W., will be open from noon-8 p.m. for any property owner to cast a ballot.