

EDC supe candidates face off in debate-style forum



Devin Middlebrook moderates the May 16 candidates forum in South Lake Tahoe.
Photo/Susan Wood

By Susan Wood

Come June, it appears the South Shore constituency wants the winner among the four candidates running for the El Dorado County District 5 seat to think quick on his or her feet.

By the way – Kenny Curtzwiler, Sue Novasel, Norma Santiago and Jeffrey Spencer (in alphabetical order), if elected, people also like you to:

- Do your homework
- Care more about us than you
- Escalate representation in a diverse West Slope-centered board
- Make the tourists behave themselves, but leave their money here
- Advocate responsible development; yet maintain the

beauty and charm of Lake Tahoe living

- Solve all of this small-town region's myriad big problems ranging from housing (permanent and vacation) as well as development to cannabis and mental health

- As an experienced government representative, keep the momentum of the solutions going; yet, as a bit of a maverick outsider, enact change in the way we do things.

And so it goes for the two women and two men from varying backgrounds, when asked pointed questions in rapid-fire succession at Wednesday night's candidates' forum at Hotel Azure in front of about 80 attendees. Some groaned, laughed, applauded and mumbled at times. Many had to pay attention at the forum hosted by the Tahoe Regional Young Professionals.

The town hall resembled a quasi-quiz show, which moderator Devin Middlebrook told *Lake Tahoe News* afterward was established because the conventional Q&A seemed old and tired.

It was difficult not to feel a little sympathy for the candidates, who held their own and as a testament to their good graces, were quite respectful of each other. This was notable, despite the questionnaire set-up to incite a tight-ship debate in 30-, 60- and 90-second increments. Questions, which came from TRYP and the audience, were framed as hot-button issues with the majority designed to that specific candidate.

Novasel, as the incumbent, could have guessed that she'd be on the hot seat given the other three want her job, and it's easy to find things wrong in the county.

At one point, she read from the Fair Political Practices Commission regulation that explained why she needed to recuse herself from the Meyers Area Plan. That conversation was biting as expected, with Curtzwiler taking issue with her not telling voters her property ownership's role before she was

elected. Then the other candidates joined in on a debate whether real property ownership in the area in question, (whether commercial or residential), should keep elected officials from representing their constituency.

“He would have to recuse himself or he would be breaking the law,” Novasel said of Curtzwiler’s and Spencer’s holdings. To that, the latter candidate jumped in saying he owns property outside the plan area.

Santiago assisted Novasel in clarifying “the caveat is (whether there’s) personal gain,” and the key is to create a sense of community that can dictate a solution.

Speaking of representation, all three challengers want the Board of Supervisors to visit, vote and vie for Tahoe more often. To this, the incumbent declared the panel has come up in an unprecedented three times in a year under her leadership – which has now expanded to vice chairwoman.

In between the “thank you” nudges to wrap up or cease speaking by TRYP panelists Middlebrook and Matt Palacio, Novasel wasn’t the only one on the defensive at times.

Santiago, a community consultant who had the supervisor job for over two terms after Dave Solaro retired, found herself explaining why she sued the county she wants to work for. She explained that she joined in the lawsuit with Supervisor Ron Briggs as a way of questioning the legal process and interpretation of the compensation rules.

On monetary matters, Santiago – in her quest to advocate for new types of revenue-generating industries from broadband to biomass – jumped on Curtzwiler’s claim that his tree-removal and roofing business tried and did not find new revenue opportunity in it.

Curtzwiler was put to task with a direct question about whether he had time for the supervisor job given his

commitment with his company K&K Services and his desire to be the “Ski Bum.”

He both grinned and winced as he pledged being a fulltime supervisor, turning the business over to his children and bypassing “a powder day” for an agendaized workday.

Novasel quickly countered, saying the job has her working 60 hours a week – including trips to Placerville twice a week. She got in 10 ski days last year.

Spencer, who has listed a who’s who of nonprofit and other pertinent boards for experience, was still able to keep a lower profile. But how does that get one elected when voters are driven by familiar faces like his other three opponents in the public eye?

Like Novasel, the planner may take the stance of an experienced background – but of a different kind. Instead of continuing with the progress at hand as laid out by the incumbent, Spencer supports a change in direction – especially in the area of transportation. He contends growth is “putting too much stress on infrastructure.”

After the debate, Lake Tahoe Unified School District trustee Bonnie Turnbull told *LTN* she attended the meeting to do some fact checking. The quick responses provided a glimpse of the public’s attention span, and she declared issues are “more complex” than soundbites. Nonetheless, she admitted the debate was “a nice change” sending her “home to process.”

For those of you seeking the same experience on the candidates displaying more of a premeditated style of thinking and less spastic one-liners, you may read the profiles on *Lake Tahoe News* for **Curtzwiler**, **Novasel**, **Santiago** and **Spencer**.