

# Meet the local candidates

Guests ask questions at the Chamber of Commerce forum

BY DAVID S. RODOCK  
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VALDOSTA — A few dozen citizens came out to the James H. Rainwater Conference Center Tuesday evening to meet candidates running for contested positions for the upcoming City of Valdosta ballot.

The Chamber also wanted to spend part of the meeting focusing on another important community issue - school consolidation.

Hosted by the Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce, guests

spent the first 45 minutes speaking with candidates on an individual basis, eating hors d'oeuvres and talking amongst themselves.

Lowndes County resident Adam Rassatt, 22, came out to learn about the candidates and where they stand on issues.

"I'm just trying to be a better citizen, not just constantly watching the cable news networks," said Rassatt. "If anything gets fixed, it has to start at the local level. It's the rocks at the bottom of the pyramid - if that foundation is not

secure, then I don't care how shiny it is up top, it'll fall like any other pile of rocks."

Lee McArthur hasn't made any decisions on who he will vote for on Nov. 8 at the ballot box, but he has a couple of issues that he wants candidates to address.

"Taxes are too strong," said McArthur. "I'd like to see us privatize as many services as possible. Sanitation can be done better by a private enterprise. The city shouldn't be

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Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce chairman Tom Gooding welcomes the candidates and guests at the Meet the Candidates reception held at the James H. Rainwater Conference Center Tuesday evening.

## CHAMBER: Both Valdosta and Lowndes school superintendents had been invited but were not present

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competing against private enterprise."

Chamber president Myrna Ballard felt it was important for citizens to be informed on local issues and learn about the candidates they could be potentially voting for. She feels recent actions by city council to make business regulations more relaxed have been a step in the right direction.

"I think we've seen just an amazing transformation, but we still have a long way to go," said Ballard. "We've taken the most important step in the right direction, which is communicating with each other and it's making a big difference."

"People will continue to focus on the important unification issue, which is going to determine the direction of our community for a long time to come," said Tom Gooding, Chamber Chairman of the Board. "But also the elected officials will have an important impact on our community as well. As we get closer to the election date, people will want to start knowing more and educating themselves. We will start to see more activity."

Each candidate had five minutes to speak to the small audience.

John Gayle was up first and he focused primarily on bringing high paying jobs to the area and working with local government organizations to do so. He also wanted to make sure Valdosta was a pro-business environment.

Gary Minchew talked about his previous successful projects that have been brought to Valdosta through his realty company, such as Best Buy, Convergys and Longhorn. He said that his experience



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Guests and candidates listen as Valdosta-Lowndes County Chamber of Commerce chairman Tom Gooding welcomes those in attendance at the James H. Rainwater Conference Center Tuesday evening.

with development would benefit the community.

Brooks Bivins acknowledged that he was relatively unknown in the community but that he wanted to work with citizens. He stated his belief in God and that high-paying jobs should be developed to keep Valdosta State University students in the area.

At-large candidate Matt Flumerfelt talked about the positive relationships he has made with many members of the audience and that he would be intelligent and fit for the position. He also said that he was ready to learn and wanted to boost tourism in the area.

Following the candidates, Kent Buescher,

founder of Wild Adventures, talked about consolidation.

He believed that each school should not be made up of 85 percent of one race and that more consolidated demographic would equip students for the real world, which is also more racially mixed.

"We need to learn to get along together," said Buescher. "Our schools are at average or below average levels for the state, which is a state that ranks almost dead bottom — that's not good enough. We will not develop a plan until we have to. We need to come together right now. We have a divided community, not just racial. There is vehement oppo-

sition about making a change."

"So rather than have an intelligent discourse, I'm shocked at what I see," said Buescher. "No matter how this vote comes down, we will begin to work to create a higher quality education for our students."

Gooding mentioned that both Valdosta and Lowndes school superintendents had been invited but were not present to speak.

"My first impression was, where was everybody?" said John Quarterman. "Last year it was a bigger room and it was packed. I also noticed now that the pro-consolidation speaker got to speak for 8 minutes while the candidates were only able to speak for 5 minutes."

"I thought the candidates were non-specific about their action plan," said Diane Cox. "My observation was that they were very vague about what they would do. I think the race is going to be based on personality. Because I'm so focused on the issues all the time and a political junkie, I need more information."

"I did not know consolidation was going to be brought up," said Cox. "I would have preferred to have an opposing viewpoint. I guess in order to be fair they should have made sure that there was somebody here to speak against it."

  
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