

Conservative or Liberal Council

...which way will we tilt the council?...

by Kat Rowoldt

Today is the first day of early voting. Today is the day citizens will begin to tilt our council one way or another. Every vote is going to count. Let's pray for well-informed voters who will elect the right people for this thankless job.



I shared last week my impression of the mayoral candidates from their forum presentations. This week we will look at the larger field of candidates for the four council seats that are up for grabs. Everyone in San Angelo gets to vote for at least one candidate, mayor. Everyone in SMD 1, 2, 4, and 6 gets to also vote for a representative from their district. This is where the weight of the council will be seen.

Candidates:

SMD 1: Anna Bartosh, Darrin Fentress, Tommy Hiebert, and Bill Richardson

SMD 2: Tom Thompson (unopposed)

SMD 4: Chris Giroux, Lucy Gonzales (incumbent)

SMD 6: Rebekah Coffman, Billie DeWitt, and Steve Hampton

Single Member District 1

Anna Bartosh has probably led this entire body of council candidates in talking financial issues. From the very first forum she has pointed out the statistics on our indebtedness. It is very clear, she is concerned about our debt. Our per capita debt in San Angelo, that's money owed per person in a city because of the city's indebtedness, has caused us, you and me - San Angeloans, to be listed as the top fourth city in Texas for debt. There are 961 cities in Texas. 957 cities are cheaper to live in. This is not a ranking we should be proud of holding.

Side bar: At the candidate forum held in the Council Chambers this past Saturday, Mayor Dwain Morrison was quickly making the rounds in the room prior to the start of the event. He had in his hand a print out from the finance department with a couple of key points highlighted in blue. He made a bulls-eye

run over to Anna to show to her how wrong she was in what she was saying about the city being in debt.

That was not the time or place for politicking to be going on. It honestly looked like he was trying to rattle the cages of the conservative candidates. But what he was showing around the room was apples to oranges. He had the finance department create a document to show what the loan to income ratio is currently in our city. It is not the same thing as stating what the per capita debt per person is in the city, ranking us against all the other cities in the state. San Angelo has the fourth highest debt per capita in the state of Texas. That's what Anna has been discussing. He did not rattle her cage.

Back to Bartosh:

If you're looking for a conservative minded, fiscally responsible candidate, Anna probably fills that bill. A retired educator, she's well studied on many issues and wants to bring better accountability back to our city council. She is concerned about crime, gangs, and safety in our neighborhoods too. She is a board member of the Concho Valley Republican Women, San Angelo TEA Party, and volunteers with the Concerned Veterans for America.

Darrin Fentress is a new face to many. While he is a hometown boy, he lived away from San Angelo for twenty years and has recently returned. A civil engineer by trade, he serves on the Zoning Board of Adjustment. He has expressed concern with safety in our city, fiscal responsibility and our infrastructure.

Fentress points out he has a working knowledge of the city because of the work he does, the city relationships he has, and the board he serves on. He stated Saturday in the forum that 98% of his work is with municipalities. Nice guy, but should we be hiring someone who may favor the city staff over the citizens because of his work relationship with them, since he has stressed that as being important?

Tommy Hiebert served our city twenty something years ago on Council. He has name recognition. We challenged Villarreal to produce his statistics from his time in elected office, maybe we need to look at Hiebert's too. San Angelo likes to elect nice people, but what was his voting record? Was he quick to spend our tax dollars, or did he work to make every dollar go as far as it possibly could?

Bill Richardson is running for the position he resigned from, creating the need for someone to fill his unexpired term. He has not attended any of the forums where he was asked to speak, until this past Saturday's forum. True to form, he continues to speak from a very conservative stance. His voting record that I witnessed was typically conservative. Canadian by birth, Richardson is retired.

It will be interesting to see if his constituents will reelect him or did he become too toxic with his Facebook racial posting which caused his resignation.

Single Member District 2

Tom Thompson is the most relaxed of all the candidates, being the only one who is not in a contested race. It sounds like Marty Self hand-picked him to step into his seat. I appreciate the fact that Tom has come to most of the forums so we can get to know him. He is the marketing director for the San Angelo Stock Show & Rodeo, plus he works for a veterinarian supply company. He will be serving on the council since Marty Self chose to not run for another term.

Single Member District 4

Chris Giroux is a new face in the political circles. This young man has made a very strong impression. By the way, his name is not pronounced G-Rocks, but instead it is French, being pronounced G-Row. Very well spoken, it is obvious he has been following city council for quite some time. He is well versed on the local issues and often substantiates what he is saying with state or national laws or issues.

Giroux is a master electrician using his skills as both a private business owner and working for the San Angelo Independent School District. He is a strong supporter of the San Angelo Police Department and other first responders.

It was the trash contract fiasco that prompted him to consider running for council. When it was announced the SAPD was not going to get their raise last fall, that was the last straw for him. He wants to get our spending in check, infrastructure brought up to standards and maintained regularly, and make sure we always honor the contracts we have with our police department and other contractual obligations.

Side bar: I was rather surprised when I learned the San Angelo Coalition of Police (SACOP) endorsed Lucy Gonzales over Chris Giroux. That did not make any sense to me. Lucy has not voted in favor of SAPD on many things, until their pay raise came up during this campaign. Interestingly, it was discovered Chris Giroux's name was left off of the ballot, the ballot which the officers used to vote for the candidate of their choice in each SMD. I am currently trying to get more information on this from SACOP's president and officers. Stay tuned. This needs to be publicly known in regard to this race.

Lucy Gonzales is running for re-election because she doesn't feel like she has completed some things that she wants to see come into fruition. Lucy is a nice, soft spoken retired parole officer. It was months into her two-year term before she ever spoke up on the council from the dais.

This past week the San Angelo Association of Realtors endorsed her because of her stance for rights of property owners. As a former real estate broker for twenty-five years and former member of the SAAR, I want to dispute that claim. I was shocked when our current City Council members voted 4-3 for the short-term rental change in our ordinances as it was presented to Council. The new ordinance, which was passed, allows someone to apply for an STR status for their property, and if approved, it REMOVES the PROPERTY RIGHTS of ALL the property owners in a 500-foot radius around the approved STR from doing the same thing. It gives rights to a minute group, and strips the RIGHTS from the vast-majority of citizens. That's not what I call a stance for rights of property owners.

At City Council this past Tuesday, during the discussion on a special use permit for a welding shop, Lucy commented "her constituents didn't feel like they have a voice." Really? Isn't she supposed to be their voice? Maybe this is something that really needs to be addressed in this election. If your constituents don't feel like they have a voice, have you not been representing what they wanted?

Single Member District 6

Rebekah Coffman is a senior at Central High School, graduating next month. She has missed many of the forums, since lots of them are held during the lunch hour when she is in school. She was in attendance at this past Saturday's forum and was very well spoken.

Rebekah appears to have a great interest in politics, even targeting that as her field of study in her coming college years. I admire her courage at her young age to take on the challenge of running for political office. With the issues facing our council in the immediate future, we need representatives who bring to the table their fields of expertise, life experiences and trained knowledge. I do hope she will continue her endeavors in this arena and gain the experience she needs to be an effective councilwoman in the future. Like Zach Taylor, candidate for mayor, their involvement in political associations would be a great way to get started and it's needed. She may be a rising conservative star.

Billie Dewitt is a retired Ethicon worker. She presents herself well, is very well spoken, and draws the audience in with her style of speaking. She is a very likeable woman. She would be great to work with on a community volunteer project. City Council is not a volunteer project. It carries one of the highest

responsibilities to our whole community. The question again becomes, which way do we want our council to tilt? Liberal or conservative.

Billie is a Democrat, a member of the NAACP, and was attending City Council meetings a few years back when the 19th street sidewalk project was on the agenda. She was speaking up, along with the other members of West Texas Organizing Strategy (WTOS), on behalf of this project. Yes, it was a needed project - and yes, it has taken way too long to be completed for the citizens in that part of our community.

I'm not sure she would bring a conservative voice to our council, which I believe is sorely needed, at this time. Remember, I'm a conservative and I'm giving you my opinion. Nice people come with all kinds of political views. Funny - how we always think nice people think and believe like we do if we "like" them. When voting, we must think politically and not likeability - looking at where they stand on the issues or where they connect themselves.

Steve Hampton is not the most gifted as a public speaker. Hey - most of us are not. Being a political figure should not require the gift of speaking publically to be elected, but oftentimes it does if the candidate is not already known to the electorate. Fortunately for him, in Ft. Stockton he was a known citizen before becoming a candidate. It was there that he served on the hospital board, Chamber of Commerce board, and City Council.

So, what does the community in Ft. Stockton think of his service there? I challenged Tony Villarreal to show us his stats, so only fair to ask the same of Steve Hampton. I actually found a prominent leader in Ft. Stockton to go on the record in regard to Mr. Hampton. Here's what he emailed to me.

George H. Hansard: "I have known Steve Hampton for over 16 years both professionally and personally. In all of my dealings I have found Steve to be an exceptional and honest businessman with the utmost ethics both professionally and personally. Steve served on the Fort Stockton city council during that time and he took the time and effort to understand everything brought before him and he made decisions on what made sense not what made sense politically, a very desirable trait needed in our communities. If Steve were running for office again, and I had the opportunity to vote for him, I would have no hesitation and would know the job was in capable hands when elected."

Steve has shown a strong conservative stance on numerous issues brought before council over the last year. He's the only candidate running for office that has been sitting in the City Council meeting audience long before he announced his candidacy (at least for the past year), along with sharing his thoughts at the podium during public comment. Sometimes his lack of gifting in public speaking works against him while trying to express himself on the fly, but in

one-on-one conversations he is very on-point as to where he stands and what he wants you to know. At this past Saturday's forum, he spoke very clearly, even expressed a bit of humor, and looked very comfortable seated at the dais.

Side bar: In last week's article I mentioned Villarreal had stunned Steve Hampton at the NAACP's forum by closing his comments with a statement pitched to Hampton. Villarreal stated, "that his term on Council had left the council in better shape and Steve could validate that." When I inquired of Hampton if he could validate it, he stated, "I do not remember it that way."

By chance, a friend of mine, sent me a news article on Steve Hampton from back in the day when he was on council. Steve served on council (2007/2008) the term immediately following Villarreal. She was excited she had found something that substantiated the type of service he gave on council back in Ft. Stockton. She must have been excited, she texted me after midnight!

Here's what she found that Midland's NewsWest 9 reported:

FORT STOCKTON MAYOR FIGHTING WITH COUNCIL MEMBER OVER BOND IMPROVEMENTS

FORT STOCKTON – The Mayor of Fort Stockton is going head to head with City Council Member Steve Hampton. Hampton wrote a letter to the Editor of the Fort Stockton Pioneer asking voters to sign a petition that would put a seven million dollar bond before voters.

Mayor Ruben Falcon says he wants people to think twice before they sign the petition started by Hampton. The City Council passed the \$7 million dollar capital improvement bond, in August, but if Hampton gets 250 registered voters to sign the petition it will go on the May Ballot. Mayor Falcon says it's too late to get the bond on the November ballot and he says the city can't wait that long.

"If you sign it, that means for a whole year we won't be able to do this, because we won't have the money. We have the money to function but we don't have the money for high demand stuff like this," Mayor Falcon, said.

Hampton tells NewsWest 9 he thinks the city is spending too much and it should be up to voters to decide how they want to spend the money.

The bond will spend \$400,000 dollars on water lines for new residential developments and thousands more on water treatment plant upgrades. The bond will also pay for a trash compactor for the city's landfill and new police cars, a new fire truck, and a new animal shelter. It will also allocate \$1 million dollars for upgrades to the city's parks and recreational facility.

“We need this money now,” Mayor Falcon said, “So you can imagine how much service is going to have to increase to make up that money.”

Mayor Falcon says SandRidge Energy plans to start building 400 homes in Fort Stockton and the city is responsible for water lines and streets in the neighborhood. He says they will need to spend the money for this and other projects and will likely raise the cost of services like water and trash to pay for it.

He says if the bond stays in place, residents will pay three dollars a month more on their water bill.

“We put it together with a professional firm,” Mayor Falcon said, adding the council worked with Estrada Hinojosa Investment Bankers for a year, “they helped us with this, to do away with things that were not important. This is just all catch up work.”

I must say, as I read this, it reminded me of Pelosi’s infamous words: *“we have to pass the bill so that you can find out what is in it.”* Mayor Falcon had that same urgency to get what he wanted done versus asking the people what they wanted to do. Regardless, back to Villarreal handing off the Council in better shape to the next council, this laundry list, listed here, doesn’t sound like it was, or at least upkeep and maintenance had been greatly deferred.

8,384 population of Fort Stockton (2013) would mean an additional debt load of \$834/citizen. That would be equivalent of taking on a debt load in San Angelo of \$87,570,000 without any citizen input. I’m glad Hampton wanted to hear the voice of the citizens on this matter. Unfortunately the petition failed to be completed in time and the bond did happen. The SandRidge Energy development of 400 homes failed too. The homes were never built. Today the citizens wished they had fought alongside Hampton, as they bemoan the years it has taken to recover from this frivolous spending. We are doing the same thing here. Citizens need to awaken and pay attention.

Today we find our own City Council following this same track. They are making decisions behind closed doors, using the out-of-control sense of urgency to do something, and not asking the citizens what our thoughts or input might be. That closed room mentality is dangerous. The latest of this type of action here is the purchase of the Ford Ranch for \$50 million dollars through certificates of obligations without voter input.

Extra side bar: Daniel Valenzuela was City Manager in Fort Stockton during the time frame when Tony Villarreal was mayor. Together, they, along with other

council members, were responsible for the decisions to defer needed maintenance.

Extra side bar – 2: In December of 2000, the Wall Street Journal did an article on Fort Stockton. What? Who would ever dream that a major publication would travel to this little town in west Texas to do a story? Well the WSJ felt what was happening in that sleepy little town was worth the trip. The special report was titled *'Brokers' Exploit Absentee Voters; Elderly Are Top Targets for Fraud.*

It reports this little community had become entrenched in voter fraud, and that they controlled the elections with only 350 votes gleaned from Hispanic voters who were unable to read or write in English, were in nursing homes or even Alzheimer's centers. Ms. Candida Rangel became the person you would reach out to if you wanted to make sure you could win an election. She had control of about 240 people, set up to receive absentee ballots, that she would assist in voting their ballots. Hmm...that's illegal. People who are doing this are called politiqueres, roughly translated as vote brokers.

Extra side bar – 3: Fort Stockton hasn't been the sleepy little town it appears to be. On top of this, another issue that many spoke about was the dual Chamber of Commerce. Tony Villarreal was instrumental in developing a second Chamber of Commerce in Fort Stockton, which the local City Council had to match the funding for. The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Fort Stockton was the face of what became the racially dividing of a community.

I didn't understand the impact of what that really meant until a friend of mine sat down and shared from his heart what was happening in our community, here in San Angelo. His heart was heavy and very troubled. Mine was too when he finished telling his own story.

He began sharing about an undercurrent that is beginning to happen here in our city. A force has begun to divide our community racially. He has been approached by several fellow Hispanics who were trying to recruit him into their cause. They were now talking about *"whities" and how they were just "using him."* *That he needed to cut ties and put his allegiance with them. They, these Hispanics who are organizing themselves, are going to take over San Angelo and force the "whities" out of office.*

I had never been referred to as a "whitie." He was so troubled by what he was seeing and his understanding of the ramifications of what was to come if they were successful. Me too.

I have had friends of all races, all my life. San Angelo has come a long way in blending and strengthening one another. My heart sunk at the thought of dear friends suddenly thinking that we, "the whites," have somehow become their enemy. Who is feeding this mindset into our community? We must stop this root of division from the get go. White, Black, Brown and Yellow must join together to say NO to this division. We don't want to go back to those days.

There are so many issues we must deal with today - but it requires citizens to be informed, involved, and willing to educate themselves on current issues and needs. Your vote is more important today than it ever has been. We can't afford for politiqueres to overturn and manipulate this election.

So, these are the candidates who will determine which way our City will be going in the coming months and years. These are all 4-year terms, except for SMD 1, which is the remaining 2-years of that term. It will be 4 years of either more liberal decisions, or pulling back that stance to a more conservative fiscally responsible breath of fresh air.

The choice is ours! But...only if we get out there and vote. Several of these races may be close - and it's only going to take a few votes to flip a race. Share this article and the one from last week about the mayoral race - and help your friends and family be informed voters.

Until next time...

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