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Most Worcester City Council candidates back criteria for tax deals, support employer ordinance

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Candidates sit at the front of the room Monday at Iglesia Evangelica de Worcester on Piedmont Street for the Worcester Community Labor Coalition candidates forum. (T&G Staff/BETTY JENEWIN)

WORCESTER — Only two of 18 candidates for City Council who attended a forum Monday night said no when asked if they would adopt specific criteria for approving tax-increment-financing deals and if they would support the city's responsible-employer ordinance.

Incumbent at-large Councilor Konstantina B. Lukes and District 5 candidate Gary Rosen perhaps didn't get much applause from the labor-friendly crowd gathered at the forum, put on by the Worcester Community Labor Coalition at Iglesia Evangelica on Piedmont Street.

But Ms. Lukes, who is also running for mayor, said she couldn't support following rules based on endorsements by special interests and lobbyists. She asked whether the council should just stop granting TIFs unless they are granted "across the board."

When it comes to the REO, she said she cannot support something that is unconstitutional, which was a reference to legal challenges that responsible employer ordinances have faced in other cities.

Mr. Rosen said his answers did not mean he was against TIFs and the REO; he has supported TIFs and previous versions of the REO. He said that to him, the most important thing he can offer is his independence.

"I have made no promises to any groups or individuals," Mr. Rosen said.

The Worcester Community Labor Coalition asked the candidates to apply five criteria to their votes on TIFs: determining whether tax relief is financially necessary and reasonable; whether TIFs create good, permanent jobs for city residents; whether they provide broader community benefits; whether developers will build the project lawfully, and whether there will be proper enforcement and monitoring of tax dollars.

The coalition also asked the candidates if they would support the responsible employer ordinance. Critics of the ordinance say the apprenticeship requirements it contains effectively freeze out non-union shops.

Mr. Rosen's opponent, incumbent District 5 Councilor William J. Eddy, supported the criteria, and said he would continue to support the REO, which he said have guided his priorities for living wages and high-quality neighborhoods in his six years on the council. He said TIFs foster corporate citizenship; he pointed to successes at the Airport Industrial Park as an example.

Ms. Lukes' mayoral opponents — incumbent Mayor Joseph M. Petty, along with William Coleman and William Feegbeh — answered the questions in the affirmative. Mr. Coleman said the city's manufacturing history is well-established, but said it's time to attract new manufacturing. The council

should be helping businesses hire new people.

Mr. Feegbeh said if economic opportunity comes to the city, city residents should be able to get a job.

Mr. Petty said analyzing TIFs and supporting the REO is what the council has been doing for several years. Low-wage jobs with no pension or benefits are unacceptable, he said. People are looking for a good quality of life, he said.

Mr. Petty said he thinks about his parents' generation and how one income was often enough to support an entire family. Now it's not unusual to have four family members contribute.

At-large incumbent Councilor Michael J. Germain noted that one of the sticking points with critics of the REO — the state-certified apprenticeship requirement — is not specific to unions. He said non-union companies can have an apprenticeship program. He said he was an unabashed supporter of unions.

At-large candidate Morris A. Bergman said he would add TIF criteria that made sure new jobs coming in didn't compete with existing jobs, and at-large incumbent Councilor Rick C. Rushton said people talk about letting the marketplace determine things, but added that the city has always been about public-private partnerships.

At-large candidate Mesfin Beshir said he would be the voice of residents on the council, and at-large incumbent Councilor Kathleen Toomey said it's critical that the city bring in more business to take the tax burden off homeowners.

At-large candidate Carmen L. Carmona said residential preferences will keep money circulating in the city, which will boost the economy, and at-large candidate Peter Kush said the apprenticeship program stands out to him; he said the apprenticeships would give young city residents the guidance they need to find a good job.

District 1 candidate Christopher M. Rich said TIFs and the REO are essential to the community; they allow younger residents to stay in the city so they can contribute.

District 2 incumbent Philip P. Palmieri said more than \$2 billion in investment in his district has not happened by accident; it has been a collaborative process, he said. He pointed to the recent TIF given to expand the Dodge Park rest home across the street on the site of the former Odd Fellows Building.

District 2 challenger Jennithan Cortes said at the end of the day, what the council is protecting is human rights. He said that when he owned a business, he gave 100 percent medical benefits to his workers. That's commitment, he said.

George Russell and Sarai Rivera, who are both running unopposed in their district seats, supported TIFs and the REO.

District 1 incumbent Tony Economou and at-large candidate Michael Gaffney did not attend Monday night's forum.

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