

Research Centre hosts candidates forum

By Jon Muldoon
Smithers / Interior News

The Bulkley Valley Research Centre hosted an all candidates forum in the lobby of the new Northwest Community College campus last Wednesday, with a focus on natural and cultural resource and research issues. Most of the candidates for Smithers town council, mayor of Smithers, and Area A for the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako were in attendance. Council candidate Scott Groves was unable to attend due to work commitments, while council candidate Ken White took part over the phone from a work trip to Victoria.

The Research Centre's program manager Rick Budhwa kicked off the event, first summing up the BVRC, noting that "we essentially do science in the public interest." Each candidate was given three "hard-earned research dollars" which they could spend to answer

questions. A duck call was used for the one-minute response cutoff, and mayoral candidates Cress Farrow and Taylor Bachrach shared a pot of tea, setting the stage for a unique candidate forum.

The first question asked about the role of research and innovation in the local economy.

Council candidate Ken White, who is an entomologist with the provincial government, said he thinks the key to local research is sharing it with the community, so they can use it to make better decisions.

"I don't think I can emphasize enough the importance of research," he said.

RDBN Area A candidate Shelley Browne agreed on the importance of local research.

"We need to have science based decision making....we have a huge brain trust in this valley and we need to rely on that," she said.

Council candidate Mike Sawyer said local government should en-

courage people in other fields to base themselves in Smithers, particularly those with jobs that can be done from anywhere.

"It's a very good place to live, and there's no reason people can't be located here rather than Vancouver or Seattle or Calgary," he said.

Another question asked about what research the BVRC could undertake to help local governments make decisions related to the impacts of a large growth spurt in the northwest.

Council candidate Pauline Goertzen said she's already seeing the negative impact of population jumps in other northwest communities, many of which saw it coming and didn't prepare.

"I think we should hurry up on this, to tell you the truth," she said.

Council candidate Cheryl Ann Stahel said an ignored aspect of resource-based economies is the huge wage gap between well-paid

men working in the field, and low-wage-earning women working in the town. A sudden increase in resource employment could make that problem much worse.

"The impact on the

social structure here is incredible, and if we had 1,000 people come to Smithers, we do not have the amenities or the social services to support those people," she said.

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RDBN candidates asked about zoning powers

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Council candidate Bill Goodacre agreed that an increase in population would result in Smithers facing challenges that haven't had to be dealt with in the past, but also said there are other social issues that will need to be dealt with in coming years.

"There's another phenomenon happening in our community, and that's an aging pop-

ulation," he said.

Both mayoral candidates said they'd like to see more research on the current status of the Bulkley Valley, which would be needed first before dealing with a possible population spike.

"We need someone to collect all the information currently out there," said incumbent Cress Farrow. He said he'd also like to see re-

search that can be used to support the case for resource revenue sharing at the municipal level.

"The key thing for us is that we haven't felt those impacts yet, so I think what the research centre should focus on perhaps is baseline information, so that we can understand the current status of our community," said Taylor Bachrach.

Incumbent councillor Charlie Northrup suggested to the BVRC that they might research the impact of expanding the boundaries of local government to cover a single area from Moricetown to Hungry Hill.

"We should probably all be one community, under one governing body, so the rural people who have their concerns can vote and be part of it," he said, and address-

ing Telkwa's incumbent mayor Carman Graf, added "and that might even mean absorbing Telkwa."

A question specifically for RDBN Area A candidates asked about the use of zoning powers to enhance environmental protection of ecologically sensitive areas such as creek-side, stream-side and riparian areas.

Area A candidate

Eugene Bekar said he thinks that's a power the RDBN should take advantage of.

"I think the Regional District should be involved in something of that nature," he said.

Incumbent Stoney Stoltenberg pointed out that most of those areas are covered under provincial jurisdiction.

"Having said that, the Regional District does do zoning,

and we're very stringent about the zoning around lakes and water courses, mainly because once you damage these areas, you can't get them back," he said.

Incumbent councillor Norm Adomeit talked about resource management research priorities, promoting a balance between the economy and the environment.

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Andrew Hudson
/Interior News

Candidates speak at a Bulkley Valley Research Centre-hosted all candidates forum.

Candidates asked about climate change

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"I believe in using resources, but I also believe in managing resources so we'll have those resources in the future and forever," he said.

Candidates were also asked about strategies for dealing with climate change.

Council candidate Phil Briennesse said provincial legislation on carbon offsets has changed the priority of municipal government in dealing with the issue.

"Whether or not you believe in climate change is now almost

irrelevant," he said. "It's going to cost our community money now to deal with our carbon offsets, and because we've been so tardy, to put it politely, on moving forward, it's going to cost us a lot of money."

Incumbent councillor Mark Bandstra tried to keep the focus during environmental discussions on issues that a town council is able to deal with.

"I'd like to call myself a reasonable environmentalist. It's nice to talk about pipelines etcetera, but we have work and business to

do within our own environment here," he said. The town's priorities might "not be quite as emotional as pipelines, but they're just as important."

Council candidate Dan Mesec said council needs to be prepared for issues that affect the people of Smithers.

"We have a number of challenging issues that are going to be coming up in the next few years here, and I think our council needs to...be focused on the things that affect the local community and the local tax

payers," he said.

Incumbent councillor Frank Wray mentioned some specific issues that need research, and need to be dealt with by the next town council, emphasizing that council is the place to deal with the detail issues, not necessarily the big issues affecting the area.

"We have little problems. They're boring problems, but we need research into them," he said. "I know we're pretty close to needing a new sewage lagoon. It's not a sexy problem at all, but it's a problem."