

Stimulating Mankato

Mayoral candidates talk livability, jobs at forum

By Tanner Kent

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MANKATO — All three candidates for mayor agree Mankato is a desirable place to live.

But their own approaches to keeping — and improving — that perception became more apparent during a public forum Tuesday at the City Center Hotel.

Challengers Chris Frederick and Eric Anderson, as well as incumbent John Brady, were in attendance at the forum, which was sponsored by Greater Mankato Growth as a precursor to the Aug.

10 primary election.

Candidates had 90 seconds each to respond to 15 questions before an audience of about 20 people.

But the most incisive question of the forum might have been its first — What is the single, most pressing issue facing Mankato, and what are the steps you would take to address it? Brady pinpointed the “livability” of Mankato and the need to retain young talent within the community to address workforce concerns. He said taking steps to continue Mankato’s reputation as a place people and businesses want to live will be a challenge as local governments realize their share of the country’s economic crisis.

“We need to make people want to live here,” Brady said. “As we

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Mankato mayor John Brady (left) and challengers Eric Anderson (center) and Christopher Frederick (right) participated in a candidate forum Tuesday.

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move forward, that will become more difficult.”

Frederick said the most important issue is job creation and that he supports measures to stimulate business development on a local funding. “We’d all love to have perfect and great roads,” he said, “ but we have limited resources.” On the issue of using public funding for arts, leisure and recreation initiatives, the candidates differed level: “I want to look at how we can address the issue locally instead of waiting for the state government to hand out money or for federal stimulus dollars.”

Until now, Anderson said Mankato has been somewhat insulated to the economic downturn because of a variety of relatively strong industries (he mentioned agriculture and retail). But, Anderson said, there are signs the downturn is having greater impact and the most pressing issue is developing a plan for rejuvenation.

“If you look at Mankato proper,” Anderson said, “it’s alarming the amount of commercial properties that are vacant or for sale. ... We have to find ways to rejuvenate the private sector.”

On the issue of capital projects — the question asked was whether the city council’s spending of approximately \$3 million in capital improvement projects in recent years is adequate — all three candidates agreed that not enough is being done.

Anderson said some neighborhoods need specific improvements and that “pressing issues” need to be addressed first. Brady agreed, but said approval should be given only to those projects the city can afford to maintain while also cautioning against accumulating too much bond debt. Frederick, too, agreed but added that all projects need to be “sustainable” as local governments face the prospect of diminished state and federal slightly. All acknowledged the importance of having vibrant arts and recreation services, but Frederick said such initiatives need to be a lower priority than “major infrastructure that’s failing,” for example.

Anderson said he would consider the demand for arts and leisure services and whether that demand is driven by widespread community support or a small, but vocal, group of advocates.

Brady said publicly funded arts and leisure programs are essential to creating a healthy city, pointing to the management of the civic center and downtown revitalization efforts as examples.

“Arts aren’t just fluff,” Brady said. “ They are economic drivers.”

On other issues, Anderson said he would consider privatizing some city services and that he feels strongly about protecting the “ basic tenants of local government ... in a really stressful economy.”

Frederick said he believes the city could save money by consolidating some administrative positions with other local governments. He said sustainability and community engagement will be focal points of his tenure.

Brady said local governments need to overcome the “ turf issues” that often accompany discussions about shared services and the city needs to continue developing partnerships to promote “ workforce quality.”

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