

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE—October 16, 2017

CITY COMMISSION CANDIDATES RESPOND TO WORKERS' SURVEY

[Salina] [KS] [October 16, 2017] Like others, Salina Area Workers Coalition members have been discussing possible outcomes of electing different city commissioners. SAWC reached out by sending a questionnaire to candidates and campaign staffers by certified mail.

Former Mayor Aaron Householter, incumbent Commissioner Melissa Rose Hodges, Planning Commission Vice-Chair Owen Freiburger, and Tracy D. Wiegert responded. Their full responses can be seen at www.Salinaworkers.com. Responses were not received from Frank Hampton, Joe Hay, Jr., and Michael Hoppock.

Question 1. Salina's Assets and Needs

In response to “What is Salina’s greatest asset?” Freiburger and Wiegert noted Salina’s geographic location. Hodges described a committed, caring community. Householter specified “the opportunity to put Salina in a position to appreciate the people.”

When asked to describe Salina’s greatest need, most identified the need for economic and workforce development. Householter discussed tax issues. Wiegert wrote that new startup businesses are needed. Freiburger wrote of a wider range of employment opportunities. Hodges wrote that the greatest need is for employment security, while allowing time and energy to engage in all aspects of community life.

Question 2. Salina’s Reputation for Low Wages

Householter said he and other commissioners “fired the Chamber of Commerce” and noted that the Chamber “advertises ‘low wages’ on their website as a reason to come to Salina”.

Hodges believes that with the newly established economic development organization, “Salina is much better positioned to address that nearly 20% of our neighbors live below the poverty level and over 60% of our children qualify for free or reduced school lunches, despite low unemployment rates”.

Freiburger wrote “Inadequate wage levels do not benefit a community or make it attractive or sustainable”.

Wiegert responded that Salina needs industrial transplants, and that current major industries of Salina are approaching their 30 year life span.

Question 3. Open Meetings

Chamber of Commerce meetings are for members only. Meetings of the Salina Community Economic Development Organization are open to the public. If the City gives more than nominal dollars to an organization, Freiburger, Hodges, and Householter support that those meetings be open to the public.

Wiegert had a slightly different take-- "if any business requests city funds, that the organization will be required to have open forums to explain their need and how the moneys were spent".

Question 4. Funding of the Chamber and/or SCEDO

For years, the City contracted with the Salina Area Chamber of Commerce to perform economic development activities--budgeting \$100,000 in 2013 for this. Now, the City budgets \$175,100 to contract with a separate group that has become the Salina Community Economic Development Organization (SCEDO). While the City no longer directly funds Chamber activities, Saline County continues to give the Chamber \$30,000/year.

The two organizations split their focus:

- SCEDO works to bring new businesses to the area
- The Chamber works to retain and expand existing businesses

In November 2016, the Chamber proposed that the City fund \$85,510's worth of "worker retention" programs. In a 4-1 vote, the City denied funding (with Commissioner Karl Ryan voting for the Chamber's proposal). The Chamber failed to make its funding request during the City's usual budget processes.

Of the seven candidates, both Frank Hampton and Michael Hoppock served on the Chamber's 2015 Board of Directors. Without responses from Hay, Hoppock, and Hampton, voters can only wonder if they might take steps to restore funding to the Chamber of Commerce.

Freiburger wrote that both the SCEDO and Chamber serve important roles, that it is "appropriate for the City to continue funding these organizations *if* both are significantly aligned to both public *and* private interests".

Hodges wrote that she is committed to supporting SCEDO and honoring the City's contract to fund it. She allowed that the SCEDO Board could delegate specific duties to the Chamber, which would be responsible for reporting how public funds are spent.

Householter wrote that he would push for more seats on the SCEDO board since the City is paying most of the cost. He would also move the SCEDO office out of the Chamber's building.

Question 5. City Employees Matter

When City Commissioners make decisions about their 480+ employees, these decisions impact the employees and their families, and carry the ripple effect of any major employer.

Householter sees the Commission's role as being basically a board of directors whose one employee is the city manager. The Commission sets policy and the city manager implements it. He says "I have always felt that ... the workers... could give potential better ways to do things. A lot of insight can be gained talking to the person about their needs for the job they do."

Hodges wrote that “employees ... are valued and ... are empowered to make suggestions for improvement”. She noted the City’s lowest paid employee earns over \$11.00 an hour plus benefits, versus the (2015) MIT calculation of Salina’s living wage of \$10.21 per hour. She also noted that the Human Resources Department strives to increase the diversity of employees.

Freiburger recognized that “City ... employees make possible the day-to-day operations”. He would “promote a welcoming, non-threatening policy at meetings and study sessions” and he would urge “a greater use of task forces and committees in order to strategically identify relevant issues”.

Wiegert pointed to the City Commission’s open forum and Access TV.

6. City Commission Districts?

Candidates were asked if they support electing city commissioners by district. Hodges and Householter support commission districts. Freiburger sees challenges. Wiegert recommended no changes.

SAWC believes our community would benefit from a representative diversity in its government.

Summary

SAWC appreciates the candidates’ responses to our questionnaire. We recognize that candidates can choose not to respond. But difficulty communicating with elected officials has been associated with questionable policy making.

The successful candidates, along with incumbents Karl Ryan and Trent Davis, will have an opportunity for profound influence on this community. SAWC urges voters to learn as much as they can about the candidates' views, think critically, decide which candidates best support the interests of working people, and then vote accordingly.

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