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## **Diversion unites Cass County Commission candidates**

FARGO – The 12 candidates seeking the two open seats on the Cass County Commission come from various reaches of the county, but one issue unites their focus: the Red River diversion project.

Many candidates said Tuesday they support the project and pledge to mitigate any impacts felt by upstream communities.

However, several candidates oppose the plan and said they aim to see changes made to the project by representing rural interests on the county board.

The candidates squared off Tuesday night in two sessions of a candidate forum hosted by the Fargo-Moorhead League of Women Voters.

Current Commissioners Scott Wagner and Robyn Sorum are term-limited and cannot seek re-election in November.

Frank Anderson, Billy Nustad, Chad Peterson, Rocky Schneider and Steve Sprague are running in the primary to replace Wagner in the District 1 seat in north Fargo.

The seven candidates running in the primary for Sorum's seat in rural District 5 are: Mike Bice of Hickson; Earl Erdmann of Alice; Craig Hakanson of Horace; Marty Johnson of Horace; Brandy Pyle of Casselton; Mary Scherling of Fargo; and Mark Weston of Fargo.

Scherling and Erdmann couldn't participate in Tuesday's candidate forum, but brief statements were read on their behalf.

The two candidates from each district who earn the most votes in the June primary will face off in the November election.

Commissioners are elected by a countywide vote but must live in their respective districts.

In District 1, the five candidates unanimously support the diversion, stressing the need to ensure fair compensation for rural residents who'll be displaced by a dam feature south of the diversion channel.

Schneider said residents need "a strong voice" on the commission who won't offer unrealistic or "wishy-washy

answers” about their support for the diversion.

“Government’s job isn’t to pick winners and losers, but unfortunately, every now and then, you have to draw a line,” Schneider said. “You’re electing us to make those tough decisions on where that line is drawn.”

Meanwhile, distrust and concern over the Red River diversion plans resonates with the seven District 5 candidates, who live in rural areas outside Fargo.

Bice, in particular, is among the hundreds of rural residents who’ll be directly affected by the upstream staging area associated with the diversion project.

The component is in actuality a dam that would displace residents in Hickson, Oxbow and the Bakke subdivision.

“It’s not the diversion I don’t support; it’s the damming effects of the current plan,” Bice said.

If elected, Bice said he wants to “present real rural representation” and promote “responsible and practical flood protection.”

Similarly, Johnson would also be affected by the diversion: The channel runs through his property.

“I don’t see the diversion being sound,” Johnson said. “There’s just too many wild-card factors out there.”

Erdmann, Pyle and Hakanson also said they believe an alternative to the diversion should be pursued.

Scherling said she supports permanent flood protection but she hopes leaders will ensure the diversion “will impact as few properties as possible.”

Weston said teamwork is necessary between the rural and urban areas of the county to resolve the issue of flood protection.

“One out of every six North Dakotans will be within this diversion – I think all of us understand that impact,” Weston said. “But we do need to be resourceful ... so we don’t give up on our neighbors and friends.”

Commissioner Ken Pawluk is also up for re-election this year, but he’s running unopposed for his District 3 seat.

One commissioner is elected from each district to serve a four-year term. The annual salary is \$20,877 plus benefits.

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