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Amber Rountree shines at South Knox Alliance Candidate Forum

By Rose King

The South Knox Alliance hosted a Candidate Meet and Greet last week. Candidates for Knox County Commission at-large Seats 10 and 11, Circuit Court Clerk, County Clerk, Register of Deeds and School Board were each given five minutes to discuss three questions related to the office they are seeking. Adam Fritts, SKA board member, introduced the candidates and posed the discussion questions.

Despite being the final speaker of the evening, Amber Rountree radiated enthusiasm as she discussed her accomplishments and her vision for Knox County Schools.

Amber Rountree, who currently represents the 9th District and is serving a second term as vice chair of the Knox County Board of Education, returned to Dogwood Elementary for the candidate forum. As the school board member representing the Community

School, she had been there earlier in the day visiting classrooms and seeing some of the great work going on. The mother of two boys not yet in school is working on her doctorate degree in education and literacy.

The former Halls Elementary School librarian has a passion for children and education that has made her a driving force in growing great schools in Knox County. She was instrumental in the recently completed comprehensive rezoning which allows students to attend the schools closest to them. "I feel that neighborhood support is so important to our kids," she emphasized.

Rountree talked about the benefit of the community school program such as Dogwood. "This model brings services, partnerships and mentors to our school, which has contributed to our students' success."

Another recent success she mentioned has been

the South-Doyle library which, thanks to a generous grant by Randy Boyd, has had a half million dollar renovation. She invited everyone who hasn't already seen it to schedule a visit. The model library has been visited by other schools in Knox County as well as those across the state.

She was a member of last year's Superintendent Search Committee along with school board members Tony Norman and Susan Horn. Rountree was happy to select Superintendent Bob Thomas, a selection which she says has brought an increased positive school culture and morale. She is also proud of the work accomplished by the educational disparity in educational outcome task force of which she was a member.

Rountree believes that there is still much to be done and said she has great plans for the future of Knox County Schools and the schools in South Knoxville. A top priority that she

is currently working on with Superintendent Thomas is addressing safety and security concerns at South-Doyle High School.

Speaking about the development and expansion of the early literacy program, she said, "It's probably no surprise given my background that I believe literacy is the key to our students' academic success. When gaps in literacy skills aren't caught early, it is hard for students to close those gaps and become successful. We have a great Pre-K program here at Dogwood. I want to see this extremely successful early literacy program continue to expand throughout Knox County."

Candidates for county commission at-large seats present were Ronnie Rochelle, Larry Smith, Justin Biggs and Tori Griffin. Daniel Gerke was represented by Danny Wilhoit and Larsen Jay was represented by Scott Broyles. The candidates were asked to

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PHOTO BY ROSE KING.

9th District school board member and candidate Amber Rountree addresses a large crowd at the South Knox Alliance candidate forum last week at Dogwood Elementary School.

Questions answered at mayoral candidate debate

By Mike Steely
steelym@knoxfocus.com

Campaign supporters and interested citizens packed the auditorium at Jewelry Television's mayoral debate Thursday.

WBIR's John Becker hosted the debate and the questions were submitted prior to the event by registered guests. Present were Republican candidates Brad Anders, Glenn Jacobs and Bob Thomas along with Democratic candidates Rhonda "Mousie" Gallman and Linda Haney.

The two questions involved raising property taxes in the county and the possibility of a metro-type government in the future.

Raise Taxes in Knox County?

Haney said the county may have to raise taxes "if we want to advance." Gallman said she might consider it but "can't promise."

Anders said he wouldn't take raising taxes "off the table" and said the county "has no margin to operate." Jacobs said "No," stating

that money is "better in your pocket than in some politician's hands."

Thomas said "No" and said that the county needs to "use business sense" and look at programs that could be reduced and save money.

What about a Metro Government in Knox County?

The candidates for Knox County Mayor were asked about their opinions on creating a metro-type government between the county and city.

Haney replied she favors an eventual consolidation of the two governments and added she has lived in a metro-government area and it "works well." She also said she understands that county residents would probably oppose the idea.

Anders responded that the "county isn't set up for that" and cited the cost of it but suggested that some departments, like Parks and Recreation, might be merged.

Jacobs agreed some departments could be consolidated and said he "lives in the county and don't want it."

Thomas said he "can't imagine that" and noted that a move to metro-type government doesn't originate in the county mayor's office and "won't take a foothold." He added there's "no question of some consolidation of services."

Biggest problem in Knox County?

When asked what the biggest problem in Knox County is, Anders cited the infrastructure citing a 30-year old road plan.

Thomas cited the opioid crisis and said abusers are treated like criminals and need a chance.

Jacobs mentioned the opioid problem and said the county can't incarcerate its way out of it.

Gallman cited opioids, safety, and school safety and said "everybody is afraid."

Haney said the largest problem is the education

system, safety, teachers pay and the need for drug education at an earlier age.

The candidates were also asked about neighborhood safety, pay raises for teachers, major employers in the county, TIF and PILOT financing, and requiring sidewalks in new developments.

In closing remarks Haney said she is "a proud Democrat" and asked her party members to step up and support another voice in the county.

Gallman said she was a student of politics and referred people to her Facebook campaign.

Thomas said he has more than 30 years of business experience and said he wants a better future for his children and grandchildren.

Anders cited character and leadership, adding, "Nobody on this stage has more experience in county government."

Jacobs said that while other candidates have lots of experience in government that there "may be some things they don't want you to see."

Early voting starts Wednesday

By Mike Steely
steelym@knoxfocus.com

Early voting in Knox County begins Wednesday and the races for sheriff and county mayor seem to be driving the turnout. There are lots of other offices on the ballot, everything from commission races to non-partisan school board races.

All in all whichever party primary you vote for, the ballot is going to be a bit longer than you might expect. Early voting runs until April 26 with the county general election slated for May 1.

Registered voters in the county, which includes Farragut and Knoxville, will find the early voting locations open 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 11 a.m. until 5 p.m. on Saturdays, except for the Karn's Senior Center.

Cliff Rogers, Administrator of Elections, told The Focus that the commission hopes for 50 to 60,000 voters. He said that only about 30,000 voted four years ago but noted that there was no opponent then in the county mayor's race and the sheriff was an incumbent.

"We'd like to see more but will be happy to see the turnout doubled," he said.

Locations of the early voting include the small assembly room at the City-County Building, the Love Kitchen at 2416 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave., 1645 Downtown West Blvd Unit 34, New Harvest Park at 4775 New Harvest Lane, 4952 Clinton Highway in the Clinton Plaza, Farragut Town Hall, the Carter Library at 9036 Asheville Highway, the Halls Recreation Center at 6933 Recreation Lane, and one new location: Meridian Baptist Church South at 6513 Chapman Highway.

The Karns Senior Center, at 8024 Oak Ridge Highway, will not be open on Saturdays because of other events scheduled there.

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