Forum

From page 1A

city, state and county officials, and make decisions based on what is best for Mason County."

McNeill stated that he is proud to serve as Mason County Judge Executive.

"I think it's important to highlight, six years ago when I took over office, Mason County sat on reserves that were just north of $17,000, borderline insolvency," he said. "Through fiscal management and conservative financial management, we've grown those reserves to north of $3 million."

He further noted the "immense progress" seen in local businesses, mentioning Enviroflight, PPI and Mitsubishi.

First, candidates were asked what they believed the biggest challenge was facing Mason County.

McNeill responded that he believed the biggest obstacles were revenue, creating job opportunities and improving infrastructure, noting how crucial it is to transport water to all areas of the county.

"A lot of these candidates don't realize the City of Maysville operates the majority of our municipal water works, while Western Mason and Western Lewis-Rectorville are our rural water districts," he explained.

McNeill also mentioned the proposed hyperscale data center project in Mason County, drawing attention to the developer's name, which had recently been revealed at the time of the forum.

"Our Meta project — and yes, we are allowed to say the name — our Meta project tackles all three of those with immense investments, fixing our water, wastewater, infrastructure, bringing in a baseline of 400 six-figure jobs for our kids and bringing in immense revenues to better operate our paving, bring up our employees' pay and quality of life," McNeill said. "And I do find it rather interesting that our Western Lewis-Rectorville project triples the availability of potable water in the eastern part of Mason County. Projects like that utilizing public/private partnerships with our model will end up taking Mason County forward."

Bach agreed that infrastructure, jobs and affordable housing are important, while also mentioning public safety.

"Public safety to me is a big thing," he expressed. "We have, I think the county got $3.2 million in ARPA funds, COVID relief funds. The sheriff's departments, volunteer fire departments, the people I think should have gotten that money didn't get anything. They're the ones that were out working during COVID. They were the ones who should have gotten a little bit of that money. Pay-wise, equipment, what have you, it doesn't matter."

Bach added that since McNeill had mentioned the data center, he also wanted to speak on it.

"I just think that the data center from the beginning wasn't handled right. I think it should have been a little more transparent," he remarked. "I think if it wasn't so secret, so mysterious, people would have taken it just a little bit better."

Candidates were then asked what they thought the county could do to retain its population.

"I just think it's the jobs," Bach answered. "We need more jobs. I think we need to entice people, manufacturing jobs to come to industrial parks."

He added that he also felt programs like the junior fire department program were "awesome" and "keeping a lot of people in Mason County," and that local schools were doing well at teaching skilled trades.

McNeill expressed that increased opportunities might improve population retention.

"Opportunity in the form of 400 high-paying, career-making, family-sustaining jobs," he elaborated. "Thousands of long-term, decade-long construction and trades jobs. Investments, not only in our infrastructure, but doubling the size of our sheriff's department, our Maysville Police Department, our fire, cash payments out to all of our volunteer fire departments. It is the active recruitment of global top 10 technology companies to Maysville and Mason County, Kentucky that will empower our community going forward."

McNeill noted that although Mason County's census shows a loss of one to three percent of the population per year, contiguous counties lose 10 percent or more. He expressed his belief that this is caused by the "frequency and magnitude" of Mason County's projects, such as the downtown PrimaryPlus hospital, Good 360 and Pepsi, reiterating that Meta will bring "incredible revenues" and "incredible opportunity" back to the area.

Candidates were then asked next what county programs or expenses should be reduced, eliminated or changed.

McNeill reiterated that he is constantly evaluating county expenses.

"Again, as I referenced, it is a herculean feat for a county to go from borderline insolvency in $17,000 in reserves to north of $3.3 million in reserves," he said.

He noted the recent reinvestments in healthcare in downtown Maysville, the investments in the East End and the historic preservation of the Lees Creek Covered Bridge in Dover, as well as the upcoming water projects.

McNeill concluded that he and the county commissioners are always fighting to improve the quality of life of county residents.

"Before I answer that," Bach followed up, "I wanted to follow what the judge said, talking about the volunteer fire departments. I spoke to one the other day. The volunteer fire chief said he has not been contacted about anything to do with the data center and he's in that area. Has heard nothing about any of the roads being closed, any equipment he needs or anything like that."

Bach then compared his campaign to climbing a mountain.

"There's a mountain right inside, right in the middle of Mason County. And you have some people climbing this mountain that want everybody to look up and see them on top of this mountain. That's not me," Bach stated. "I want to climb that mountain for Mason County, and I want to look down and see Sardis, Germantown, Dover, Lewisburg, Highland Heights, and I want to see what I can do for them. I don't care if anybody sees what I do. I want to roll up my sleeves every day, go to work and do what's right for Mason County."

Afterward, Maysville's mayoral candidates — sitting judge Debra Cotterill and Robert Boone — were welcomed to the stage.

During her introduction, Cotterill noted her education in science and community and economic development, stating that her most relatable city leadership experience was as director of the nutrition education program at the University of Kentucky, where she was responsible for federal and state compliance within the budget and staffing.

Boone then spoke about one of his supporters.

"You know, in our line of work in public service, the people you helped often speak louder than what we could say about ourselves," he said. "In a recent letter to the editor, Jacqueline Smith said that she often gets the question, 'Why Maysville?' after she moved here two years ago from New Mexico as a remote employee and co-owner of a small hardwood floor restoration business. She said, 'While there are many reasons this community won us over, we would be remiss not to name the biggest catalyst, Robert Boone, recruited us here.' Now, Jacqueline and her family could be paying taxes and opening their business anywhere, but they chose Maysville, and I'm happy to have played a small role in that decision.

"I'm running for mayor because I have a vision and experience and skills to effectively lead the city."

Candidates were first asked about their plans to rebuild Maysville's East End.

"Beautification is a huge part because neighborhoods really have the ability to raise the soul and cause people to really think greatly about where they live," Boone responded.

He noted that he and Maysville city commissioners recently visited the IGA to meet its new owners.

"We're very excited to have them, and I'm very thankful that the building owner reached out and was able to really recruit and help make his building viable for a new business, because it's a recognized USDA food desert there without it," Boone explained.

"Calling it the East End and not downtown is a good start, because it's its own neighborhood, and they have their own vision and their own history that's important, and those are excellent ways to start with revitalization," he concluded.

Cotterill stated that 400 properties in Maysville have been improved or sold to developers in the last five years.

"As far as the grocery store, that was a collaboration of many calls to the property owners and then calls to the prospects that he had," she continued. "Invited them to Maysville, they came, we sat down. I asked them for a business plan, they presented that. I took it to the ADD, got their input, got the ADD to sit down with them and then ask what they needed to get the deal done, and we sealed that deal. It's about putting the work in to make those things happen and that's what I think is important and what I've been working on, and so is the then collaboration of people to come together."

She also touched on local housing projects, as well as the new splash pads and the community garden, noting, "There's a lot of pieces that are working, but there's a lot still to do."

Candidates were then asked what the biggest housing challenge facing the city was.

Cotterill responded that there is a lack of affordable housing in Maysville.

"And so, there has been a task force put together that's working, kind of a follow-up to the housing committee on the Comprehensive Plan, and with that, there are some programs that are going to come out in November from Kentucky Housing Corporation," Cotterill explained. "Part of that is looking at supporting private investment or ownership with some types of incentives. It might be looking at qualified manufactured homes, and they can in fill on some of the city plots, and also looking at how the city could incentivize property owners to put buildings back, housing back on those lots, something called like a ground lease."

She noted that the state has also recognized the crisis and is introducing opportunities such as revolving loan funds.

Boone suggested introducing more government transparency and participation in the demolition process, explaining a concept he calls "the catalytic fund," which would allow the city to sell acquired properties and earmark the proceeds "just for the restoration of property."

"So, this catalytic fund can be a catalyst that change entire neighborhoods in our city. And these are non-taxpayer funds. This is property the city has acquired and can sell," explained Boone.

Finally, candidates were asked how the city plans to recruit and retain its first responders, police officers and EMTs.

Boone remarked that his background is in workforce development, where he previously "helped many employers build programs to recruit and retain and build a talented work force here."

He suggested evaluating wages and fringe benefits by conducting a salary study for the city, expressing, "Dignity in work is very important, and people need to earn a fair wage for the work that they do."

Cotterill noted that in 2025, the state average household income was $87,000, whereas Mason County's average was $59,000 with a median of $39,000.

"So, that paints a real picture of where the problem lies," she said. "They have to earn enough money to live in this city. Everybody needs that to buy a home, to send your kids to school, to pay for your healthcare. And we have to get that pay, those salaries.

"And I think another big thing that a lot of the officers and fireman have said to me is respect — respect from their city and county leadership for the job they do and putting their lives on the line," Cotterill concluded.

The general election will be held on Tuesday, Nov. 3, from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m.



