

ELECTION 2009: Six candidates running for city commission

From Staff Reports

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BIG RAPIDS — Come Election Day, six candidates are looking to fill two open seats on the Big Rapids City Commission.

Candidates include former city treasurer Lorraine James, former city commissioner Dan Rothstein, Wastewater Treatment Plant Superintendent Bruce Everitt, local school teacher Robert Hendrickson, Ferris State University professor James Nystrom and retired business owner Thomas E. Hren.

Terms for city commissioners Tom Hogenson and Peggy Brennan are up next month. Both are term-limited.

Commissioner terms are four year terms, beginning Nov. 16 until November 2013.

The Pioneer asked all six candidates to answer a few question about current issues regarding the city. This is the first part of a two part series on the city commission candidates. Check out Tuesday's Pioneer, when the candidates talk about the city's relationship with Ferris State University and small businesses.

Bruce Everitt is the Wastewater Treatment Plant superintendent and has been a city resident for most of his life.

He has lived in Big Rapids throughout most of his life. In that time, he has worked in retail in Downtown Big Rapids, in a Big Rapids industry and worked for the city twice.

Family and friends, he said, will testify that he's forthright, diligent, honest, direct and determined to accomplish what he undertakes.

Everitt said he's running for city commissioner because there are people who feel disenfranchised by the city and want a change.

“They feel that their government is not representing their interests or the large majority of constituents (the silent majority) but rather is catering to special interests,” he said. “I believe that I represent that conservative, hard-working majority that feels their government ought to look out for their interests and serve them, not govern them into submission.”

Bob Hendrickson teaches government, civics and English at Chippewa Hills Mosaic Alternative High School. He is married with four children and has been a city resident for about 20 years.

He said teaching government and civics has given him insight into specific issues that face the city and the surrounding areas.

During his time as an administrator at Ferris State University, he created and administered budgets, was a founding member and served as the first treasurer of the Friends of Ferris.

Hendrickson said he's running for a seat on the city commission because he has benefited from the quality of life offered in the city and wants to ensure other families have similar opportunities as he has had.

"I believe I understand the issues and I can provide the leadership necessary to meet the challenges ahead," he said. "I tell my students, 'get involved.' That's what I decided to do."

Tom Hren is a retired business owner. He is married with one son and grandson and has been a resident for 14 years.

He currently serves as the elected treasurer of two executive boards, one for a political party and the other for a community garden in White Cloud. The former small business owner also is a past president and vice-president of the Fremont Jaycees and former church board member.

Hren said he wants to contribute as a representative to the community that has been good to his family.

"I have decided that it is a good time to do this because I would like to use my years of experience to serve the city in which I expect to live the rest of my life. Also, because it is a big challenge, it's exciting and I really enjoy politics," Hren said.

Lorraine James is a retired city treasurer and owner/president of Miedema's Bkkg & Tax Service. She is married with nine children and 13 grandchildren and has been a city resident for 37 years.

She has more than 25 years of governmental experience, which includes but is not limited to all aspects of finances (budgeting and auditing), negotiations, bond issues, income tax, assessing, property taxes and utilities. For more than 30 years, she has been a business owner in the community.

She also volunteers with Big Rapids Little League, Artworks, DBA, DDA and St. Peter's Lutheran Church. She served on the Library Committee, and currently serves on the

city's Refuse Committee.

James is running for the position to give back to the community.

"I have an in-depth financial background, one that could be very valuable in this day and age of financial uncertainty. ... I want to be part of those long-term decisions that affect us all," she said.

Jim Nystrom is an assistant mathematics and computer science professor at Ferris State University. He is married with three children has been a city resident for more than two years.

He has served as a senior systems engineer with a Fortune 15 company before becoming a professor at FSU. In that position, his responsibilities included budget forecasting for the utility plant, site maintenance and machining and tooling services the group provided to research divisions.

Nystrom is running for the position because city residents asked him to consider running.

"I am somewhat excited about the prospect of working on helping keep Big Rapids a nice place to raise a family," he said.

Dan Rothstein works in sales at Hanchett Manufacturing. He is married with one daughter and has been a city resident for 47 years.

He has served as city commissioner for eight years and has been involved with various community organizations, including Jaycees, Optimist Club, Rotary Club and the United Church of Big Rapids. He has served as chair of the maintenance board of appeals, member of the plan board and is currently a member of the Big Rapids property tax board of appeals.

Rothstein said he is running for the position because he has a deep love and respect for the community and a continued interest in all aspects of city government.

"I miss being a part of the process of our city government and I feel that I have the knowledge from past experience to assist in decision to help the city continue to move forward," he said. "I have a good working relationship with city management and staff. I have a continuing desire to serve the city."

What is the City Commission's role and responsibility for maintaining working relationships with the city's neighbors (county, townships)?

EVERITT: I believe the City Commission should promote open, honest discussions with the county, the townships (especially the two adjacent ones who share common services) and Ferris State University. Ways should be sought to cooperate and share services when it would result in cost savings for all residents. Too often, cooperation has been a game

of one-up-man-ship, each party trying to gain an advantage over the other at the expense of the taxpayers. I believe the extraordinary revenue from treating Ice Mountain wastewater should have been equitably shared with all of the utility rate payers.

HENDRICKSON: Mecosta County, its townships and the city of Big Rapids comprise an economic and cultural area in which each governmental unit is dependent on the well-being of the other. The city commission's role is to help in finding ways that these interdependent bodies can work together to provide the economic and community services that make this area a great place to live. This should include sharing physical and economic resources as well as working together for economic development while helping to minimize the negative effects of today's economy on the area.

HREN: It is important to have a good, working relationship with the county and adjacent townships, as what happens in one jurisdiction can affect what happens in others. There should certainly be a "keep-each-other-informed" relationship at the very least. Specific issues identified in this way can have special attention directed to them as necessary. This special attention can be done by way of the city manager and city staff. Or depending on the nature of the issue, it may be wise to have direct contact between elected officials, at least on matters of policy. The city commission should have a regularly scheduled status review to make sure that they understand what the current status is.

JAMES: These working relationships are essential for our community as a whole. Each unit of government has a mission but we are all headed down the same road – running government for the betterment of all of our residents, giving them a quality of life they deserve.

NYSTROM: There are some fairly well defined relationships between some of these entities. Big Rapids provides some services outside of the city limits, and in other situations can cooperate with other entities both in town and out of town (for example, the mutual aid situation that exists between university, city and county policing). From a transparency perspective, I would be interested in digging a bit deeper into the financial relationships between all of these entities in order to see if everyone is paying their fair share.

ROTHSTEIN: We are all part of the same community. It is important for this City Commission to promote ideas and actions, which will benefit our county and townships — working together to save money, create jobs and enhance services to everyone in the greater community.

We all know the State of Michigan is experiencing a revenue shortfall, therefore it is cutting its financial support to cities. That means cities have to be conscious of spending tax dollars. Under your leadership how would you prioritize city expenditures?

EVERITT: This is an extremely important issue. The city needs to focus on its core services (water, sewer, sanitation, streets and safety), beyond that, citizen input is necessary to determine priorities for discretionary spending. I believe it's time to develop

specific definable goals in the form of mission statements for each service the city provides. The master plan should be revised every few years and adhered to. Too often substantial sums of money are spent without regard to the plan. Unnecessary purchases are made because grant money is available. This necessitates ongoing upkeep and future replacement costs by the citizens. In difficult economic times the city should not be purchasing commercial property and parkland. The way to save taxpayers' money is not to take their money from another source, but to attempt to live within the means.

HENDRICKSON: A city commissioner's responsibility, in any economic climate, is to prioritize the services provided by the city to its residents. Some of these are seen as essential services such as police, fire, water and sanitation and trash pick-up. Others are not. Rather than "cutting" services or programs, the commission needs to determine, through input from city residents, whether there are non-essential services or programs that can be delayed or slowed until a source of funding can be found.

HREN: City government should always be frugal with the people's money, and in doing so needs to differentiate between "absolute needs" and "nice-to-have wants." Streets, utilities and public safety should be the top priorities as these are most widely used by everyone. Cost/benefit analysis should be applied to all city services and those with the highest cost-to-benefit ratios should be cut first. Some city services may be able to be transferred to the private sector, allowing individuals to decide for themselves whether or not they wish to use and pay for those services. In this latter case, that takes the choice of spending or not spending out of the realm of city commission politics and transfers it to the local citizen.

JAMES: If it appeared that cuts were needed I would be happy to work with staff going over the entire budget looking for non-essential supplies, equipment etc. I would certainly hesitate cutting staff because when staff at a government level is cut, services are cut. During these tough economic times, I am the perfect candidate to fully understand city expenditures.

NYSTROM: Where would you make cuts? There are many sources of revenue that come into projects that take place in Big Rapids. Much of the dollars are funneled through Lansing and then come back to us. Many long term (and annual) expenditures involve matching funds contributions with federal and state sources. The better we can stretch a dollar, or turn \$1 into \$2, the better prepared we are for the future. I have started to look over the city's detailed 2009-10 budget and if elected I would review some previous years' annual reports to get a better feel for exactly where the money comes from and where it goes. (So ask me the second question again in 2010)

ROTHSTEIN: Prioritizing city budget expenses is a process that involves the city manager and department heads. The plan board also is involved by producing a list of prioritized capital expenditures. Prioritizing city expenditures using tax dollars is a daunting task. A commission must first be aware of essential services such as police, fire, clean water, sanitary sewers, street maintenance, for example. If a balanced budget cannot be accomplished from the mentioned sources, reductions involving delays of

proposed projects without interruption or elimination of essential city services would be necessary.

If you could see only one issue being accomplished from start to finish, what would it be? And why?

EVERITT: I would make every effort to restore confidence in government, by focusing on primary services and providing high-quality services at reasonable costs. This can be accomplished by reducing bureaucracy and redundancy.

HENDRICKSON: Although it really encompasses more than one issue, I would like to see, from start-to-finish, the revitalization of the east side of the river. This area represents Big Rapids best chance for both residential and economic growth. It contains the industrial park and most of the city's remaining "buildable" land. With input from commercial, industrial, residential and governmental interests, I believe we need to create a master development plan for the east side.

HREN: If it's not already being implemented, I would want to create a proactive, long-term, frugal and continuously reviewed city financial planning and control system. The nature and results of this should be easily understood and readily available to the public. Why? Because it's the people's money and the people pay the bills of this city. In these rough economic times, we all have to learn to live on less and be more efficient. Frugal is not a four-letter word. We need to hear it more often.

JAMES: The city is currently in the middle of many projects – USDA Intermediary Loan Program for small businesses, new financial software for the Treasurer's Office, Wastewater Treatment Plant renovation, user charge study, the VSCI grant, library status, etc. If elected, one project that I might be able to see accomplished from start to finish would be the replacement of the Baldwin Street Bridge. The city always has projects, that is what has stabilized our growth in our community and I look forward to having valuable input on all up-coming projects.

NYSTROM: One of the reasons I did decide to run for city commission is because I feel there is room for improvement in how Big Rapids deals with pedestrian and bike traffic. There are many tough crossings in town (almost all of which involve the M-20 Business Route) that create real hazards for young and old alike. Making Big Rapids safer for walkers and bikers would be this one issue (if I am being forced to name just one).

ROTHSTEIN: There are several issues that I was involved with during my previous tenure on the commission that are in various stages of completion. They include our Wastewater Treatment Plant upgrades, the third phase of Riverwalk, our downtown development and our library issue. Most of these projects are moving forward toward completion or at least a phase of completion. The library issue is becoming more and more urgent. I truly believe that our library is a key part of our community. Funding for our library is diminishing rapidly with little hope of city revenue coming to the rescue. I believe if our library is to continue to exist as we now know it, a district library must be

formed. The library must have a stable funding source and that will not happen if it continues to be funded primarily by the city. A district library will create a continuous source of funds and the library will be able to add programs and service instead of needing to make cuts in all areas.