

Some sparks at Atlantic County freeholders debate

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NORTHFIELD — With three seats on the Atlantic County Board of Chosen Freeholders open along with the County Executive job, the Atlantic County Bar Association hosted its first political candidate debate this year.

Atlantic County Executive Democratic challenger Susan Korngut did not make the Tuesday debate because it was the same night that the regularly scheduled Northfield City Council meeting is held, of which she is a member.

With Korngut absent, current Atlantic County Executive Dennis Levinson, a Republican, spoke at both the beginning and the end of the debate to say he wanted to continue as County Executive. He touted his accomplishments as County Executive with the current Atlantic County Board of Freeholders.

Levinson said the county lowered its budget by \$5 million this year, and the county tax rate is one of the lowest in the state. The county made Atlantic City into a university town with the establishment of a Stockton University campus within the resort without a cost to the taxpayer.

"We can no longer depend on tourism in this county," said Levinson, who also talked about wind farms and economic development at the Atlantic City International Airport.

The political sparks mostly flew between incumbent Freeholder Ernest Coursey, a Democrat who represents the 1st District, and his Republican challenger Sumon Majumder, an Atlantic City police officer.

Coursey touted his more than 25-year career, which includes serving on the Atlantic City Council from 1991 to 2002 and Atlantic City Deputy Mayor from 2002 to 2006.

Since Majumder basically used the problems of two of the county's 23 municipalities - Atlantic City and Pleasantville, which include high taxes and potholes - to ask what has Coursey done as Freeholder.

Coursey defended himself saying he is responsible for county roads, and there are no county streets in Atlantic City with potholes. He said he has a proven record of leadership, and he does not go along to get along.

Democrat Nick Polito, a Hammonton firefighter, is running to win the at-large seat of Republican Amy L. Gatto, who is the chairwoman.

Polito stressed the things he wanted to do if he wins the election, which include lowering county foreclosures, having more green and renewable energy and advocating for changes in bail reform that keep people accused of selling heroin in jail.

Gatto said the county needs to move to the next level as far as long-term planning and economic development. She also said she is not a fan of a countywide police force similar to what Camden County has done.

Similar to Polito, Absecon Councilman Steve Light, who is running for the seat of incumbent Republican Freeholder Richard Dase, who represents the 4th District, talked more about what he wanted to do that criticizing his opponent.

Light wanted to see more waterfront property development in Atlantic City, see Bader Field and Sandcastle Stadium turned into some type of Cooperstown, N.Y.-like attraction and more carriers and cities make sure of the Atlantic City International Airport, such as Nashville, Tennessee.

Dase said he fully supports various levels of government, along with insurance companies, paying money for addiction treatment. Dase also pointed with pride to the freeholders passing an ordinance in August to back \$5.75 million in bonds to build a hangar at the Atlantic City airport, potentially bringing 125 jobs in aviation maintenance and repair to the area.