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12/17/2008

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On the run

BY LARRY GABRIEL

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I expected last week's mayoral forum at University of Detroit Mercy to be a circus. What else would you expect in an event with all 15 candidates invited? I figured someone, especially one of the lesser-known contestants, would do something over-the-top to garner attention and headlines.

As it turned out, of the 10 hopefuls there, the only one who clowned around was Duane Montgomery, whose salient point was that the city needs money and the only way to get it is to tax the casinos even more. "Tax the casinos" was pretty much his answer to every question. But Montgomery, a self-employed engineer, didn't take it over the top and backed off a bit in his closing statement, saying, "I've been joking, but you know I'm telling the truth."

I spotted a few old friends and familiar faces among the 250 people in attendance. Before things got started, most of the candidates chatted with acquaintances, although former deputy mayor Freman Hendrix busily worked the crowd, pressing flesh as he walked along the aisles. I found a seat just in front of the television cameras (WDIV and FOX 2 were there) with a clear view of the podium. A woman came in and sat next to me. "I have to be able to see the liars," she said of her seating choice. It was but the first of several peppery opinions she voiced in my direction.

The format made for a convivial atmosphere. Fox 2 News anchor Charles Pugh moderated and kept things on track. The mayoral hopefuls didn't have to address each other; it might have made for a spicier stew if they did. Pugh posed questions that had been submitted in writing by the audience. Each question was addressed by three of the candidates, so there was little chance for any to attack the others' answers. The only scrum came after Hendrix criticized Mayor Kenneth Cockrel Jr. for staffing newly opened police mini stations with fully trained officers who, he said, needed to be out patrolling the streets. Cockrel waited for the microphone to come back to him before sharply responding that Hendrix was misinformed about station staffing, and that the former deputy mayor didn't seem to have any problem with similar staffing during the Archer administration.

Smelling a brawl, Pugh said, "Let's take the gloves off," and allowed Hendrix to respond. But the excitement was short-lived and the sedate atmosphere returned without any low blows or bare-knuckled brawling.

The other candidates in the house were Dave Bing, D. Etta Wilcoxon, Warren Evans, Stanley M. Christmas, Nicholas Hood III, Joseph Warren Holt and Jerroll M. Sanders. Sharon McPhail and state Rep. Coleman A. Young II had commitments that caused them to miss the gathering. Bing and Hendrix both had obligations that took them away about 90 minutes into the scheduled three-hour forum.

As things droned on, my seat neighbor grew more antsy and feistier. When Wilcoxon responded that she was not in favor of term limits for mayor and City Council members, saying that "people are capable of electing leaders," my neighbor spat out derisively, "No we're not. That's why we got the last mayor (Kwame Kilpatrick)." For the record, Hood was in favor of term limits — saying that vibrant cities such as Atlanta and New York have them — and Holt seemed to favor the idea.

The forum topics were education, economic development, crime and healthcare — although healthcare got short shrift among the questions. Here are the awards for some of the most distinguishing points made by the candidates:

Most Repetitious Statements

Montgomery, who began most responses with, "Ya'll know where this is going," before calling for more casino taxes. Sanders began her first three responses with plugs for her website, which provide her plans in full detail. Wilcoxon kept saying that the Detroit River is an international waterway that we need to exploit. Christmas translated the Latin phrase "we hope for better things" on the city seal more times than necessary.

Most Out-of-the-Box Idea

I'm not saying these are good ideas but ... Christmas touted a compulsory high school graduation policy. That means no dropouts. Montgomery said we should have a city-owned casino, hotel, amusement park and shopping center to create jobs.

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Biggest Gimme Question

It was the luck of the draw, but the inquiry, "what have you done for city development" came up on Bing's round. Holt, an east side community activist, and Wilcoxin, publisher of the *Renaissance Observer*, couldn't come close to Bing's record as a businessman and developer.

What Faux Pas?

In touting after-school programs for kids, Holt said that, "idle hands are the devil's playthings." This caused a little consternation and a correction that the old saw is, "an idle mind is the devil's workshop." However, a quick Web check reveals that there are several variations on the theme and neither version was definitively right or wrong.

I Have No Charisma

Christmas, who has the best name to turn into a catchy slogan, seems to be the guy who paid attention in Latin class but will not get much attention in this race. His closing statement, which included a last telling of the city seal translation, also included shout outs to the Christians, Muslims, Hispanics and Black Christian Nationalists in the audience.

Lamest Reason to be Mayor

Bing and Cockrel, both of whom otherwise had good things to say, also trotted out the lamest reasons to vote for them. Bing touted that his integrity has never been questioned. The last time a politician pulled that out of the bag after a predecessor's scandal we ended up with President George W. Bush. Cockrel said that we should vote for him because the city needs stability and continuity during these perilous times. Yeah, that's how we got Bush for a second term.

Overall, the forum put faces to the names in the race that I'm not familiar with. While Christmas, Holt and Montgomery showed themselves to probably be lightweights in the contest, Wilcoxin and Sanders demonstrated that they have the mettle, though probably not the money, to stay in the ring. The big names — Cockrel, Hendrix, Bing, Evans and Hood — pretty much played it safe. They know that the odds, and the money, favor one of them. Although a Feb. 24 primary election looms, it's still pretty early in the game. Forums like these will help all the candidates sharpen their sticks for some serious poking down the road.

During the mingling after the forum I greeted Kimberly Cockrel, whom I met socially about 10 years ago. Despite the bad PR that has bedeviled Detroit's first lady, she was gracious and convivial, remembering me when I thought she might not have. Hey, that counts for something.

As I left, I noticed that all of the cookies and punch that were set out had been sucked down by the crowd. If nothing else, we got a little physical sustenance for having been there. To revisit Marie Antoinette's famous line: Let them eat cookies!

Larry Gabriel is a Detroit writer, musician and former editor of Metro Times. Contact him at letters@metrotimes.com.

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My firm created a construct which we defined as 'universal candidacy' aka anyone can run for public office detroit residency is not a requirement but only voters in detroit can vote for the candidates...I expect before soon others will enter the race mayor of Detroit..

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