



**Candidates make debut at forum - 04/04/2017**      Tim O'Hara

Open seats for Key West mayor and county commissioner and the creation of a Lower Keys seat on the Keys Energy Services board drew new and younger faces to the first gathering of the election season.

A handful of first-time candidates made their political debut at Monday's forum sponsored by the Key West-based group Hometown!.

Monroe Holloway and Dave Gonzales, new faces to the local political scene, both announced Monday night their interest in running for Key West mayor. Mayor Craig Cates will have reached his term limit in 2018.

The two mayoral candidates, both raised in Key West, spoke from two entirely different perspectives.

Gonzales, who worked for the Navy for 20 years before working in the private sector, spoke of protecting the unique culture and environment of Key West.

Holloway, 31, voiced the concerns of those working in the service industry and other young millennials who are battling the affordable housing problem and struggling to stay in Key West.

"We have no sustainability if people are leaving every week," Holloway said.

Holloway was not the only young face on Monday to express interest in running for elected office. Giancarlo Espinosa, of Key West, announced Tuesday that he was interested in running for the Congressional seat currently held by Carlos Curbelo, R-Homestead.

Espinosa, who had no trouble calling himself an idealist, spoke about the need for members of Congress to "really represent all of us, instead of mega corporations."

Espinosa's and Holloway's enthusiasm drew major applause from the mostly older audience.

Sunny Andracchio, general manager of Schooner America 2.0. was another

political newcomer to announce his intention to serve on the Key West City Commission. He did not say which seat he will pursue.

Commissioners Sam Kaufman, Richard Payne and Margaret Romero are all up for re-election in 2018. Only Kaufman spoke at Monday's event.

Kaufman could face opposition from two-time Florida Keys Mosquito Control candidate Oliver Kofoed, who said Monday he is considering a run for the seat.

First-time candidates Walt Drabinski and Greg Daniels announced their intentions to run for a recently created seat on the Key Energy Board, which would represent people living outside of Key West.

The Keys Energy Services board approved creation of the seat earlier this year, but the state Legislature still has to approve the change to the board, which is scheduled to occur later this month. Currently, only people living in Key West can vote and serve on the board, which serves the community all the way up to the Seven Mile Bridge.

Drabinski, of Cudjoe Key, is an electrical engineer by trade and was instrumental in the fight to have the Florida Keys Aqueduct Authority bring gravity sewer collection systems to areas of Cudjoe and Sugarloaf keys.

Daniels served on an advisory board for Keys Energy Services while it was working on allowing people outside of Key West to serve on the board for the public utility.

With County Commissioner George Neugent saying he will most likely not run, two candidates expressed interest in the position, which represents residents from Big Coppitt Key through parts of Marathon.

Take Stock in Children Program Manager Chuck Licis and Lower Keys accountant Chuck Weitzel, both first-time candidates, announced their intention to run for the District 2 seat.

Also on Monday, school board incumbents John Dick and Bobby Highsmith told the crowd they plan to seek re-election. County Commissioner David Rice, who represents the Middle Keys, also announced his intention to run again.

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