

KONK Life

Hometown Call for Candidates

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Hometown! 'Call for Candidates' gets big response

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The Key West and Monroe County 2020 political season kicked off in earnest April 1, when Hometown!, the local non-partisan candidate and election information group, held its first call for candidates, offering an open microphone to anyone running for office or thinking about it.

Despite the 2020 election being 17 months away, Hometown! President Todd German pointed out to the overflow crowd at Salute Restaurant that he had a three-page list of candidates who wanted to speak at the event.

"The idea tonight is to get everybody thinking about the elections that are coming. On the national level, people are already running," German said.

The speeches were short, consisting of incumbents talking about how well the government is running and their challengers saying the opposite. And some were refreshingly clear in their intent to run for reelection.

"I love my job. I want to keep it," said Circuit Court Judge Bonnie Helms.

In Key West, three city commissioners are up for reelection to what would be their final term due to term limits. Incumbents Billy Wardlow and Clayton Lopez said they are running for reelection. But Commissioner Jimmy Weekley said he hadn't decided yet.

"However, with that said, I am going to talk about a platform. A platform that has three E's, as I call them: the environment, our economy and equality. Those are the three things I feel are most important to any community," Weekley told the Hometown! crowd, showing which way he was leaning on running again.

Wardlow, who worked for 30 years as a Key West firefighter, including serving as Chief before becoming a commissioner, said he has devoted 40 years to public service and will be running on

his record. Lopez, who might be mulling a run for mayor in 2024 if he wins a final term as city commissioner, said he has loved being part of a team that solves problems. “Yes, I am running once more, the last time. Let’s do the last dance together,” he said.

None of the three incumbents have drawn any challengers yet.

Key West Mayor Teri Johnston, who on April 1st had only been in office 133 days, took the opportunity to announce she will run again in 2020, perhaps hoping to head off a challenge from former Commissioner Mark Rossi, who was at the Hometown! event but declined to go to the microphone, even when urged by German. Rossi ran for mayor in 2018 but was removed from the primary election ballot because his campaign manager did not pay a \$225 municipal election assessment fee on time. When German asked him about running again, Rossi said he had to ask his wife.

Johnston was not so circumspect.

“I’d like to [serve as mayor] for a lot longer than 133 days. I promise you we are going to work very hard to make this the very best community that we can,” she said.

On the Monroe County level, Commissioner Heather Carruthers, who represents Key West on the commission, announced she would be running again in District 3, settling the question of whether she was going to give up her seat to make a run for state representative when Rep. Holly Raschein terms out in 2020. Carruthers listed several issues she has championed, including transparency in county budgeting and communications, and her long-time work to keep flood insurance rates down.

“Thanks to persistence, we are now having a voice as the small community on a national stage. I want to continue that work,” she said.

Carruthers’ seat was one of the few at the April 1 event that drew an early challenger. Richard Boettger, who described himself as an investigative journalist for his work writing for Key West The Newspaper, the Key West Citizen and this newspaper, Konk Life, said he was instrumental in filing complaints against four county commissioners for underreporting their income and assets on state-required annual disclosure statements. All four, including Carruthers, were fined by the Florida Ethics Commission in 2017. In Carruthers’ case, the ethics commission ruled that while she had listed the cash value of a brokerage account, she hadn’t listed the specific assets in that account.

“If you do care about ethics and expertise, I’d like your vote,” Boettger said.

Former Key West Mayor Craig Cates had already announced he was running for the county commission seat currently held by Danny Kolhage, who has not said yet whether he will run for reelection. Cates said his campaign will focus on what he can contribute, not criticize the

incumbent if he chooses to run again. And Monroe County Mayor Sylvia Murphy, who has announced she will run for reelection, will face two challengers, current Islamorada Vice Mayor Mark Forester and Key Largo resident Robert Majestka.