

Few surprises at Chamber forum

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MAKING THEIR CASE—Pittsburgh Mayoral hopefuls, left to right, Bill Peduto, Jack Wagner and Jake Wheatley, respond to questions at the African American Chamber of Commerce candidate forum. (Photo by J.L. Martello)

Aside from the fact that as of the scheduled start time for the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania Mayoral Forum, only one of the four Democratic Primary contenders, Pittsburgh Councilman Bill Peduto, had arrived, there were no real startling surprises. Republican candidate Josh Wander did attend, and was on time, but did not participate, saying he will wait to debate the winner of the Democratic race. Chamber President and CEO Doris Carson Williams was relieved to see state Rep. Jake Wheatley, arrive just as Peduto prepared to make his opening remarks, former Auditor General Jack Wagner walked in a few moments later. She thanked the crowd of about 75 for their patience and sponsor Comcast before turning things over to moderator Rod Doss, editor and publisher of the New Pittsburgh Courier. When asked what they had done and would do to improve conditions for African-American businesses, Wagner said he would work to make sure the Equal Employment

Opportunity Commission actually monitored minority contracting, Peduto said he'd authored living wage legislation and responsible banking legislation that he said would help Blacks. He wants to create a small business office and break up contracts into pieces small that Black-owned businesses can compete for. Wheatley shook his head and said, "I'm wondering why were having this same conversation, when it's the same one we were having when I came here in 1997. We need a new process based on what you know, not who you know." Asked what they would do if allegations made in an American Civil Liberties Union law suit—that Pittsburgh Bureau of Police personnel are actively removing Black applicants from the police academy candidate pool—are true, Peduto said he would professionalize the department.

"It isn't rocket science," he said. "There is discrimination and I'll work on that."

Wagner said that he would better prepare candidates to pass the tests and would recruit more from the military. Wheatley was the only one who addressed the criminality issue.

"If that is going on, we have anti-discrimination laws on the books. Those people will be brought to justice," he said. "As mayor I will make that call." When asked about charges

in a TV ad that he had voted against funding a senior housing development in Homewood and against earmarking half the parking taxes on the old Civic Arena site for the Hill District, Peduto admitted the charges were accurate. "I voted against the first one because people asked for a public hearing and didn't get one," he said. "And Danny's parking bill ran counter to the efforts of Carl Redwood's 'dollar per car' proposal." He also repeated that the most significant thing he'd done for African-Americans in his district was renovating Mellon Park.

Asked about suing the city's largest employer for more taxes, Peduto objected to the arbitrary nature of the challenge to UPMC's nonprofit status.

"You can't selectively punish one entity," he said. "I suspect UPMC will prevail for that reason." Wagner said the city has the right to challenge. "Profitable nonprofits need to pay more. It's been estimated that in UPMC's case it should be about \$20 million a year," he said. "That would do a lot for the city."

All three candidates again said education and employment initiatives are the best way to eliminate the violence and drugs in the city's poor and Black neighborhoods. And all three agreed that the city's long-term, no-bid professional service contracts have to be reopened and publicly bid.

"No bid contracts are anti-American," said Wagner. "It's prime for political mischief."

Wheatley said all contracts would be openly bid if he were elected. Every contract will have minority and women participation," he said. "And I will enforce that." Peduto said he's already written legislation to eliminate no-bid contracts, but the language needs to change. "We need 'no solo bid' legislation to keep these things from just being renewed year after year," he said. "It's pay-to-play on Grant Street. I've been lucky to not have needed that kind of support." The Primary Election is May 21.

(Send comments to cmorrow@newpittsburghcourier.com.)