

# Chamber Candidates' Forum yields enthusiasm, few surprises

[Apr 13, 2016](#)

By Christian Morrow



**EXPRESSING THEIR VIEWS**—The candidates from left: William Anderson, Jake Wheatley, Ed Gainey and Jessica Wolfe. (Photo by J.L. Martello)

Unlike past candidates' forums hosted by the African American Chamber of Commerce, this year's event—focusing on the two local State House seats held by African American Rep. Jake Wheatley, D-Hill District and Ed Gainey, D-East Liberty—featured a new venue, the Omni William Penn Hotel, and a new challenger Jessica Wolfe, a first-time candidate from Allentown.

But like past forums, it was graciously hosted by Chamber President and CEO Doris Carson Williams and skillfully moderated by New Pittsburgh Courier Publisher Rod Doss, who, despite the lateness of Gainey challenger William Anderson began by introducing the candidates, who then made brief opening statements before fielding questions.

Two-term East End Rep. Gainey touted his part in directing tax credit financing and development funds to Homewood and Larimer and in securing \$3 million to assisting in moving Wilkinsburg High School students to Westinghouse for the upcoming school year.



## **DORIS CARSON WILLIAMS**

Wheatley, running for his 8th term, called his 13-year stint representing the Hill District, parts of the North Side, South Side, Downtown, Uptown and Hazelwood a journey. He recalled failing to get a law passed to guarantee Black firms access to state contracts during his first years under the Rendell administration, and said with Tom Wolfe in the Governors mansion—and himself now the minority chair of the finance committee—he thinks there's a good chance it now might go through.

Wolfe spoke of her teacher father igniting her interest in politics and public service, which she has carried forth as a homecare social worker and as a board member of the Allentown Community Development Corporation and a two-term member of the Allegheny County Democratic Committee.

She said she would take a new approach to leading the district by building a broader consensus across neighborhoods than Wheatley—who she said is isolated and, along with his staff, not visible in the community—has.

“The office is not just one person. It is all the residents, families and children in the district,” she said. “We can’t rely on the relationships one person has with the government in Harrisburg.”

Wheatley responded that his approach has brought \$10 million in development dollars for the Almono site in Hazelwood and another \$5 million to the South Side.

“I think it’s naïve to say I haven’t been at community meetings. Whether I’m here or (in Harrisburg) I’m working on this district, and I think my staff has been out there for me at functions,” he said. “So I will stack my record against anybody’s”



### ***ROD DOSS***

Wheatley said his proudest achievement is still the SHOP ‘n SAVE market in the Hill District, which came after years of hearings on food deserts and politicking for funds. Wolfe said she is happy to see that grocery in the district.

“I’m glad he brought a grocery to the district, but it’s the only one,” she said. “As great as it is, it’s not enough for 13 years. Where’s the grocery for Allentown, for Hazelwood?”

Wheatley said he is not a developer he’s a connector bringing resources together with neighborhoods and builders to make such project possible.

At that point, William Anderson, B-PEP activist, auto body shop owner and four-time candidate for the 24th Legislative District seat arrived, introduced himself and dove into the fray, saying the district—Homewood, Lincoln Larimer Belmar, North Point Breeze—has deteriorated further under Gainey’s watch and violence is out of control.

“I’m tired of having to raise money to bury 3-year-olds shot in the street. We have people being thrown out of their homes,” he said.

Gainey said he had brought in development dollars and has tried to get gun control legislation passed. Anderson and Wolfe also said they favored gun control. Gainey—the only candidate with military experience—noted that the violence was there long before guns came into play.

“We have to unlearn that behavior,” he said.

All also favored on a \$15 minimum wage, but none has specifics for easing the burden on small businesses. They all also favor more affordable housing, and agree that minority contracting should be written into any new development deals in the city.

In closing they all said they would fight for equality and to make the city and their districts great.

Wheatley said he has become viewed as the “angry” Black man of state politics these days, but said that doesn’t bother him.