

https://www.nola.com/news/northshore/st-tammany-parish-president-first-debate/article_e74fb656-36ef-11ee-9d7a-03fcf20b5b7c.html

Budget deficits and moratoriums: St. Tammany president candidates face off for the first time

Here's what they had to say about the top issues facing the parish as they campaign for the Oct. 14 election.

By ALEX LUBBEN | Staff writer

Aug 9, 2023



Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer and Parish President Mike Cooper answer questions from the Chamber of Commerce. . St. Tammany Chamber held a Parish President Candidate Forum for the upcoming election between current President Mike Cooper and Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer at The Greystone in Mandeville on Wednesday, Aug. 9, 2023.

PHOTO BY GRANT THERKILDSEN

Qualifying for the Oct. 14 primary election hasn't ended yet, but that didn't stop two candidates for parish president in St. Tammany Parish from facing off Wednesday for the first time in a debate-style forum hosted by the Chamber of Commerce.

Incumbent Mike Cooper pitched voters on the strides made during his first term to improve St. Tammany's infrastructure, which has been under strain due to the parish's consistent population growth. Cooper's lone announced challenger to this point, Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer, called attention to the friction between Cooper's administration and the parish council, and pledged to mend relationships if elected.

So far, only Cooper and Cromer, both Republicans, have signed up to seek the parish president's office. Any other potential candidates have until Thursday afternoon to qualify for the race.

Cooper opened Wednesday with an emphasis on the issues and his accomplishments. "We've implemented plans and safeguards to ensure our growth does not outpace our infrastructure," he said. He touted the



Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer, left, and St Tammany Parish President Mike Cooper shake hands before the a forum hosted by the St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce on Aug. 9 at The Greystone near Mandeville.

PHOTO BY GRANT THERKILDSEN

safety of the parish, too. “While other areas of the state are seeing rises in crime, our parish remains one of the safest places to live,” he added.

Cromer opened with a more personal note. “Being the mayor of Slidell is the best job I’ve ever had,” he said. “It’s the most fun, most important, most rewarding job.” Over the course of the hour-long event, Cromer highlighted his experience as preparing him well to run the parish. “One of the things I’d like to do right off the bat is what I’m calling a ‘government summit,’” he said, which would involve convening heads of government agencies to hash out the parish’s budget shortfall. The goal:

to show the public that different parts of the government are capable of “standing shoulder to shoulder.”

“If we can do that,” Cromer added, “people may develop confidence and trust.”

Much of the parish's government work — and politics — has come against the backdrop of a continuing financial crisis stemming from the parish's loss of more than \$20 million in criminal justice funding when voters first shot down a sales tax in 2016 that covered a spate of state-mandated criminal justice costs.

The parish government's allotment to the agencies it must financially cover was \$6 million less than those agencies had requested for this budget year. For the 2024 budget cycle, that deficit is expected to climb to at least \$13 million, Parish Council members have said.

The St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce, which represents local businesses, through the panel moderator, Charles Dowdy of Northshore Broadcasting, tried to gauge just how friendly each candidate would be to businesses and property developers. Development in St. Tammany has been a hot-button issue — and central to the friction between Cooper's administration and the Parish Council.

During Cooper's presidency, the parish government has issued a series of development moratoriums, limiting how and where developers can build. Nonetheless, Cooper, who in 2022 steered a moratorium through the council aimed at decreasing density, emphasized that he supports homebuilding in the parish.

“The rezoning density moratorium does not stop building,” Cooper said. “You do not want to stop building.”

“If you’ve got the funding and the infrastructure in place, you don’t need a moratorium,” Cromer said. “We’ll put in housing that fits within the zoning code that we have established, and if we don’t have the proper code established, we’ll fix it.”

“It’s not rocket science,” Cromer added. “I’ve done that,” citing his experience working at the Michoud Assembly Facility, where NASA makes rockets.