

Cooper, Cromer face off in Chamber candidate forum

BY ALEX LUBBEN

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Qualifying for the Oct. 14 primary election hadn't ended, but that didn't stop two candidates for St. Tammany Parish president from facing off near Mandeville on Aug. 9 in a debate-style forum hosted by the Chamber of Commerce.

It was the first meeting of the candidates since Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer qualified a day earlier to challenge Mike Cooper, the incumbent elected to his first term in 2019. They were the only people in the race after qualifying ended Aug. 10, setting the stage for what will be a 9½-week, head-to-head run to election day.

Cooper pitched voters on the strides made during his first term to improve St. Tammany's infrastructure, which has been strained due to the parish's consistent population growth. Cromer called attention to the friction between Cooper's administration and the Parish Council, and pledged to mend relationships if elected.

Cooper opened 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 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 hourlong event, Cromer highlighted his experience as preparing him well to run the parish.

"One of the things I'd like

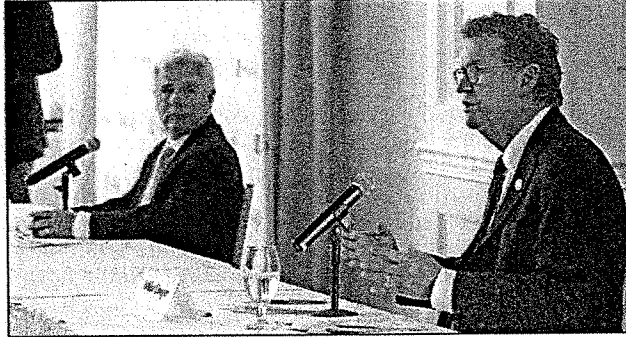


PHOTO BY GRANT THERKILDSEN

Parish President Mike Cooper, right, answers a question while Slidell Mayor Greg Cromer looks on during the St. Tammany Chamber of Commerce forum held Aug. 9 at The Greystone near Mandeville. Cromer is challenging the incumbent Cooper for the parish presidency. The election will be held Oct. 14.

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 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, 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 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.