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The Express-Times

John Stoffa is the better choice for Democrats for Northampton County executive

Thursday, May 14, 2009

John Stoffa Vs. Ann McHale

The choice for Democrats in Tuesday's primary for Northampton County executive is as clear and compelling as it ever has been – and we hope Democrats chose wisely, because the face-off between Executive John Stoffa and County Council President Ann McHale will decide the direction of the county for years to come. The winner will face Republican political novice J.C. Kelleher, who is unopposed.

Four years ago, Democrats had a similar choice – between the upstart Stoffa and two-term executive Glenn Reibman. For all the reasons voters sent Reibman packing, they should nominate Stoffa for a second term. He offers an experienced hand, a balanced vision for growth and tax restraint, on-the-job insight into human services and corrections, and a feisty independence from party-first politics.

In fact, Stoffa has had to go against fellow Democrats on council at times to effect savings for taxpayers – in health care, tech services, therapy programs for inmates, phone services – and by sweating the details on some projects, including repairing the courthouse cupola and replacing windows at Gracedale.

Not surprisingly, McHale has been on the other side of some of these arguments, and yet, after 11 years on council, her primary thrust to unseat him is delivered in generalities ("he hasn't done much") and by listing ho-hum achievements by the council, such as renovating its chambers and adjacent offices.

Stoffa has taken a stand to avoid having to double hard-time jail space every decade, backing a treatment/work-release center in Bethlehem Township. McHale says she was misled by the original proposal and didn't realize it included work release, arguing an industrial park is the wrong place for it. Stoffa says the zoning permits it, the jobs are there and cities shouldn't have to keep bearing the burden of county services.

Stoffa has the better open space funding idea – a 0.5-mill pay-as-you-go plan, rather than borrowing \$37 million and paying interest over 30 years.

When asked if she would collect the council-approved increase in executive pay that she voted against in March 2008 (from \$65,000 to \$85,000), McHale couldn't remember casting that vote.

The divide between these candidates is wide enough to accommodate a stampede of informed voters. Stoffa has led human services departments in two counties and has one term as executive. McHale is the office manager of an insurance agency.

We hope Democrats will take the time to measure the performances of the candidates and see in this case that the status quo – Stoffa – is the argument against complacency and against a return to the laissez-faire, party-run management style that dominated the county administration before him.

Stoffa says he wants a second term to map out what the county needs, looking at where it will be in 2030 and 2050. Taxpayers are fortunate to have someone looking ahead, but also to deal with the day-to-day headaches of running a large bureaucracy with equanimity, bipartisanship and some backbone.

That's Stoffa.