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What are the qualities that will make the best sheriff for McKinley County?

All five candidates got a swing at answering that in an April 5 forum sponsored by the McKinley County Democrats and hosted by the Gallup-McKinley County Chamber of Commerce.

Candidates included one Republican, Elreno C. Henio; and four Democrats: Matthew K. Hughbanks, Francie L. Martinez, Paul R. Lucero and current Undersheriff James Maiorano III. Most have backgrounds in local law enforcement and many in multiple agencies. All have lived locally for many years, and some have family ties to the Gallup area going back generations.

All of the candidates pledged to work the job full time (although the post only requires 8 hours a month in the office) and to be visible in the community. Each candidate gave his own perspective on five questions of concern to the community. Candidates did not see the questions in advance.

There was broad agreement that recruitment and retention, especially from the local population, are top challenges for the department, while substance abuse and related crimes are the biggest challenge for the community at large.

Approaches to the staffing problems broke down into two main categories: community outreach and internship programs for recruiting, and the more sensitive topic of training a reserve posse to help fill in the gaps.

“I would support that, but I would really watch how they are trained and their understanding of what they can and can’t do,” Henio said. He and others were mindful of confusion that volunteers caused at BLM protests in recent years.

“If we do start it we need to make sure they are trained not only in McKinley County but in the State of New Mexico,” Lucero said. “We really need to have a program, especially in times like now when we are 10 deputies short.”

Martinez agreed. “The biggest thing for me is how we train them,” he said, adding that reserves should get academy training. “When a liability issue comes up there will be questions about who trained them and where they were trained.”

Maiorano said reserves should be deployed only in specific situations, such as support for search and rescue operations, parades and special events. “We are involved in revamping the program and the training for it,” he said.

Hughbanks noted that reserve programs can also serve as farm teams for recruiting sworn personnel.

Community policing was another idea that got broad endorsement.

“We can’t be sitting around waiting for the next call,”Hughbanks, a retired deputy and owner of Red Rock Security & Patrol, said. He also noted that crime prevention starts with “teaching our kids, starting at a young age. Teaching what’s right and what’s wrong.”

Lucero said the department should put more into interagency cooperation, including with the federal alphabet soup – DEA, FBI, Customs & Border Patrol, Homeland Security and others.

Some of those agencies can help overcome jurisdictional boundaries that limit county deputies, and may also be sources of financial support, he said. “You can curb this problem we’re having if we work together.”

Martinez appealed for compassionate policing, including steering arrestees to diversion programs when possible. “We need to help these people. They might be criminals to us, but we need to be out there helping them. I have relatives out there,” he said. “We need to meet them halfway and meet the community halfway.”

Hughbanks also suggested setting up a constable program on the reservations to help handle low-risk situations with improved response times. Constables could also be cross-trained to respond to social and minor medical situations, he said.

On grappling with recent state legalization of recreational marijuana, most agreed that communication is the major issue: “legal” doesn’t mean no limits. Laws on driving under the influence and certain public behaviors apply to cannabis as well as alcohol and won’t be ignored.

Given the rarified national political environment, candidates were also asked if they would enforce all laws, even if they think a law might be unconstitutional – including federal firearms laws. The only daylight among the candidates was whether to refuse to enforce a law or lobby to change it.

“Our officers will use the statute book they have been given to charge to the best they have in front of them, as well as consulting with the DA’s office,” Maiorano said. He noted the only past departure was disagreement with a Second Amendment haven issue, “I stand by that.”

“A sheriff only answers to two things: The Constitution and the people that elect them,” Henio said. The other three candidates focused on changing unpopular laws rather than defying them.

Chamber Executive Director Bill Lee emceed the event, which filled the room at the Sacred Wind Center.

“It’s so good to see a full room,” Lee said. “Often times elections and events like this are poorly attended.”

For those who missed the live event, the forum will air on KGOP at 5 pm April 9.

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