

3 Democrats in New Hanover commissioner primary

Zapple, Middleton and Olson-Boseman vying for 2 slots in November

By Tim Buckland

StarNews Staff

NEW HANOVER COUNTY — An incumbent, a political veteran and a new face will contest a Democratic primary to determine which two move on to November's general election for New Hanover county commissioner.

Rob Zapple was narrowly elected in 2014, taking second place by a handful of votes over Republican Derrick Hickey and surviving several challenges to his victory.

He is joined in the primary by newcomer James Middleton and Julia Olson-Boseman, who is trying for the second time to win an election to resurrect her political career — she is a former commissioner and three-term state senator who left politics in 2010 to resolve personal issues. Olson-Boseman placed fourth in the 2016 commissioner race — finishing behind third-place finisher Patricia Kusek.

Two Republicans — incumbent Skip Watkins and Eric Lytle — entered the race, meaning they move on to November without contesting a primary.

Early voting ends May 5. Primary Election Day is May 8. The position's salary is \$17,660 and \$25,739 for the board chairman.

1. What will be the most important issue facing the county in the next four years?

Middleton: The county's No. 1 challenge will be managing development in a way that will allow us to absorb the region's projected population growth while ensuring that current residents have access to affordable housing and jobs that provide a livable wage. Additionally, our community will have to address the need to keep our water clean and safe and bring the opioid crisis to an end.

Olson- Boseman: Infrastructure, traffic, education, and the opioid epidemic are all critical issues for New Hanover County currently and in the next four years. Throughout the entire county we need to address the effect of growth and development as it relates to all citizens. I believe we are past a critical planning phase and must address current issues in order to move forward. Public transportation should be a dependable accessible option for the growth and environmental health of our county. We need to make sure our schools are equally funded so that every child has access to an exceptional education.

Zapple: Managing growth and infrastructure — including, a thorough and transparent revision of our unified development ordinance, addressing traffic issues

related to new development, protection of our beaches and coastal environment, expansion of water and sewer in the unincorporated areas of the county, support for educational needs — school redistricting, additional classroom space, school safety and additional mental health therapists, addressing the needs of our aging/ elderly population and creating a long-term strategy to provide workforce/affordable housing in our county.

2. What, if any, recommendation from the Garner Report that you support hasn't been accomplished yet?

Middleton: I believe that more can be done to attract biomedical jobs to this area so that students graduating from UNCW in that field can have a place to start their careers. Additionally, adding an engineering degree at UNCW would help prepare more residents to be competitive in the modern job market. We have two great public institutions in this county and I believe that working more closely with them can ensure that they are preparing students for the kinds of jobs that we are attracting.

Olson- Boseman: I support the establishment of a Department of Economic and Community Development and the hire of a director to lead the department. I feel that this is necessary in order for New Hanover County to concentrate on recruiting new businesses and investments that are not detrimental to our natural resources and that pay employees a living wage so that our citizens can adequately provide for their families.

Zapple: Provide the public free high-speed internet access throughout New Hanover County. Achieving this goal would benefit our educational institutions, healthcare providers, support our efforts to build a sustainable skilled and knowledge based workforce, enhance our entrepreneurial sector and increase economic development efforts in attracting new businesses to New Hanover County. Broadband availability and access to high speed internet is an economic development tool that has proven to be highly effective throughout NC and the United States.

3. Is there a service or area not being adequately met by the county government?

Middleton: The issue I hear about most often from community members is the affordable housing crisis. Our county should have a comprehensive plan for addressing the lack of affordable housing, starting with the recommendations

from our affordable housing task force. I know folks who had to relocate because they can't find a place to live that's within their budget. I am also disappointed by the county's reluctance to embrace the role of public transportation in addressing our challenges of unprecedented growth and increased traffic.

Olson- Boseman: Infrastructure. Building projects are being approved without the adequate infrastructure in place. There is too much traffic on our roads and our

schools are overcrowded. We need to make sure that road improvements are in place and that our schools can handle the increase in population before any new development is approved.

Zapple: 1) Availability of affordable/workforce housing. Many of our most respected public servants — teachers, sheriff deputies, police officers and firefighters — cannot find adequate housing for their families in NHC. The County/City/ Habitat for Humanity partnership created to build a modest subdivision off Gordon Road is a good first step, but a more aggressive strategy is needed to incentivize developers and builders to include affordable housing units in their projects. 2) Expansion of pre-K education so that every family in NHC has that opportunity.

4. What further steps can the county take to address the opioid epidemic?

Middleton: Like too many residents of our county, I have had to witness people in my own life being ravaged by the ongoing crisis. In addition to making sure there are more treatment beds, particularly for women and parents, our treatment centers must be fully equipped to provide the necessary care to get people on the road to recovery. For example the new Trillium facility, while a fantastic step, is only initially prepared to serve men. As commissioner, I will see that every county health center is prepared to ensure that those seeking sobriety have the best chance for recovery.

Olson- Boseman: I feel that supporting programs that address life issues, as well as addiction, are critical. This is particularly important for women, many of whom lose custody of their children due to their addiction to opioids. Accessible recovery programs, mental health options, transportation, job assistance, and especially compassion, are necessary for long-term recovery. There are many nonprofit organizations in the county that are doing amazing work, but are underfunded.

Zapple: Advocate for stronger legislation that limits the number of pain and opioid pills that are allowed per prescription. Hold drug manufacturers and distributors accountable for their actions and policies that have led to a flood of prescription drugs in our community. Increase the number of 'drop off' boxes for the disposal of excess medications. Greater access to mental and behavioral health professionals. Support for the NHC/Trillium partnership created to build a new 100-bed drug treatment facility in NHC and with expansion will include needed services for women and adolescents.

5. How would you characterize the relationship between the city and the county?

Middleton: The city and the county are great partners when it comes to facilitating the needs of developers. However, county government has a long way to go to extend the same level of partnership when it comes to helping other community members. This is illustrated by the underfunding of Wave Transit in spite of the need to provide alternative modes of transportation to increase residents' mobility

and decrease traffic. Additionally, the county could follow the city's lead on taking up more recommendations from the Ad Hoc Committee on Improving Workforce/Affordable Housing. These issues can only be solved by working together.

Olson-Boseman: I would characterize it as symbiotic. I think that the city and county cannot successfully function without acknowledging their interdependence. Their willingness to work together on the future growth plan for Wilmington and New Hanover County is a positive example of this. I look forward to our county and city governments, planning officials, and economic strategists working together to secure our unique place in the state in order to address the issues we face.

Zaple: There is a solid working relationship between the city and the county that could be enhanced by scheduling regular joint public meetings — where issues that affect our community could be addressed by the combined bodies of local elected officials. Growth, economic development, a strong public education system, the protection of our quality of life, safeguarding our air and water, are concerns for all citizens of NHC. Cooperative, transparent discussions, leading to positive action by our local elected officials, could be used to harness the power of government and enhance our quality of life.

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