

## It's not easy being green...

Highlights from Plymouth Stewardship Alliance's Candidates Conservation Forum at Wildlands Trust.

PLYMOUTH -- If protecting our local environment is important to you, then the answers in the 'lightning round' - questions that Selectboard candidates had to give yes or no answers to at the recent conservation-focused forum – may have encouraged you.

“Yes,” each candidate answered to ‘Lightning Round’ question 1, climate change is real.

“Yes,” to question 2 as well: we need to strengthen conservation regulations to protect our groundwater, our surface waters, our ponds, rivers, and coasts.

Question 3 asked whether the town needs a tree protection bylaw. Yes, yes and yes!

There was also an emphatic and unanimous “no” to question 4: whether solar array should ever be built on forested uplands.

“Yes” was the answer when asked if the town should require “cumulative impact analyses for all projects affecting our groundwater and sole source aquifer.”

Question 6 asked each candidate if the town should prohibit new commercial or intensive uses in areas that are vulnerable to coastal flooding or storm surge.

Without hesitation each candidate said yes.

And a big “yes” was the answer to the final lightning round question: should the town invest in a town-wide water quality monitoring program?

If you heard only those seven yes or no questions, you couldn't be faulted for concluding that both the incumbents and the challengers for two seats on the Selectboard, were 'green' to the core.

But then, wait, there was more: over a dozen other questions which asked for more detailed and revealing answers.

And, each of the three candidates present at this forum (Candidate Scott Vecchi arrived at the last moment) is either on the Selectboard now, or served on the board in the recent past: a period during which the town has seen the loss of large quantities of open space, watched as forested upland was clear cut for sand mining, and stood by as the water in our ponds and rivers has been seriously degraded.

Why the disconnect?

All three of the candidates claimed that they were conservation-minded and attributed the gap between their shared conservation goals and actually achieving those goals, as being caused – at least in part – by a lack of staff to undertake the enforcement.

Later in the forum, when specifically asked for ‘creative solutions’ to these and the many other conservation enforcement issues, they had difficulty coming up with effective responses.

Betty Cavacco looked back to the hiring of the town’s first dedicated grant writer – something that happened during her tenure on the board and suggested that perhaps a second person in that department – dedicated to finding conservation-related grants –could be hired.

Incumbent ‘Dickie’ Quintal focused on the need for greater cooperation between town departments, “a vision” he said, where enforcement would be more effective simply because “everybody would be on the same page”.

Incumbent Kevin Canty agreed that grants should be sought but added his belief that the town could more effectively enforce conservation regulations if they prioritized enforcement in key areas: tree cover, undisturbed open space, and protections for groundwater and our sole source aquifer.

Canty also used that question to call for the Conservation Commission to carefully enforce its existing regulations, and for that Commission to return to updated regulations that had been adopted in 2022 but then discarded.

Those regulations were discarded after the Commission members responsible for them were not reappointed - by a vote of the Selectboard that included Mr. Quintal and Betty Cavacco.

That 2022 shakeup of the Conservation Commission also figured in one of the more interesting exchanges of the afternoon when the candidates were asked to name one present-day member of the Conservation Commission.

Canty wrote down “Morry” Morrison and pointed him out in the audience.

Quintal noted Morrison as well and, though he was not present, Paul Churchill, who is also a member of the Conservation Commission.

Cavacco stated she couldn’t recall any of their names but pointed out Bruce Howard, who was in the audience.

Howard simply called out, “no!”

Howard perhaps looked familiar to Ms. Cavacco because he was the *former* chair of the Conservation Commission and had led a multi- year effort to update the town’s regulations.

That update had passed but, when some homeowners objected to what they perceived as its more stringent requirements, the Selectboard, which at the time included Cavacco and Quintal, replaced Howard and three other Commissioners.

The newly installed chair was the head of a well-known coastal engineering firm and regulatory opponent, Randy Parker. Under Parker the Commission canceled the regulations Howard had worked to update and pass.

Later in the forum the candidates were asked to detail how they would support the goals of the climate emergency declaration, which calls on the town to take pro-active measures to, among many goals, sequester carbon, decrease heat island effects, reduce air pollution and insulate coastal areas from storm surge and sea-level rise.

Canty began by saying that climate resiliency was a “significant concern” of his, noting the failure of the April town meeting to approve a project focused in the Town Square area which would have directly addressed the heat island effect in that area.

“I remember last July, I got out of court and drove downtown to Town Hall, and it was significantly hotter, noticeably hotter downtown than it was at the courthouse (on Obery),” Canty said, “and that has health effects on people, and energy effects on businesses and homeowners.”

Canty continued, stressing the need to be pro-active in addressing these issues, in part because, “it's going to be a lot cheaper and a lot more cost-effective to address the problem now, than it will be in 10, 20 years when sea levels have risen.”

Answering the same question, Dickie Quintal said he has supported efforts to improve the town’s resilience and sustainability in the past and would continue to do so going forward.

He pointed to the wall that has been constructed around what he called the “pump station” on the waterfront. “People come up to me and say, ‘what a beautiful wall,’” Quintal said, to which he replies, “we didn’t put it up there for aesthetics!”

The wall was an early effort to address concerns with sea-level rise, Quintal explained, so that rising waters won’t flood out the building where sewer effluent arrives by gravity and then is pumped out and up to the treatment plant off Camelot Drive.

Quintal also joined Canty in bemoaning Town Meetings refusal to support the first phase of a downtown resilience plan, expressing the hope that they would take up the article again – and approve it – at the next Town Meeting.

One apparent point of separation between the candidates centered around their hopes for the so-called “1,500 acres,” also known as the Holtec property.

When asked about the Holtec property Cavacco and Quintal both noted their support for the idea that, as Cavacco said, “if the planets align,” new SMR (small modular nuclear reactors) could be built on the former site of Pilgrim Station.

Both Cavacco and Quintal’s enthusiastic support for new nuclear power generation facilities in Plymouth – which had been expressed at previous candidate forums – was on this occasion however, offered with a few asterisks and exceptions.

“I wouldn’t do anything that would hurt anybody or anything in the town of Plymouth,” Quintal said.

Cavacco also pointed out that it would take at least a decade to build even the new smaller modular reactors and would require special legislation.

Canty offered a more detailed response to the question, which first asked the candidates to indicate how much of the Holtec property should be retained as open space, then how the remainder should be utilized, and finally whether they would be in favor of allowing some of that land to be used for new nuclear power generation.

Canty began by noting the estimated cost of the Holtec land, which might be \$50 million or more, and his support for the ‘nuclear mitigation stabilization fund,’ which now has over \$11 million which could, theoretically, be used for that purchase.

“I would like to see us be able to buy – with cash – as much of that land as possible,” Canty said.

The Holtec land has “has unique geographic characteristics” Canty continued, noting that “Manomet Hill” is the highest point (just under 400 feet) within a mile of the ocean, between a point in Georgia and a point in Maine.

Canty held out the possibility that one area of the property – along Powerhouse Road – might be suitable for “smart economic development,” characterizing the ideal use of that section as a kind of “Woods Hole North.”

As far as the return of nuclear power to Plymouth, Canty said he had significant concerns. “We still have nuclear waste from the last plant that hasn’t gone away. We need to have that cleaned up.”

Continuing with open space questions, the candidates were then asked to name their ‘favorite trail, beach, preserve or park’ in Plymouth, and explain why they chose it and what, if anything, could be done to improve it.

Canty chose Mass Audubon’s Tidmarsh Wildlife Sanctuary and offered a list of reasons including its amenities (handicap-accessible trails, a viewing platform) and its restored cranberry bog. He listed the Foothills Preserve and the Beaver Dam Conservation Area as well, but said, “If I had to choose one it would be Tidmarsh.”

Cavacco chose the “1,500 Acres,” the Holtec property, as her favorite, citing its mountain biking trails, though most of that area is private property and, technically, those bikers are trespassing. She said she favored retaining the entire 1,500 acres (not including the old power plant) in open space.

Quintal went into his past to find his favorite open space, recounting North Plymouth’s dirt paths and trails, camps and businesses that once were hilly, forested and unpaved, but largely don’t exist today.

He and a dozen or so members of a local bike club would spend all day biking on and around Nick’s Rock Road in North Plymouth, Quintal recounted, visiting a now defunct “A&W” Root Beer stand, or climbing the fire tower.

“You’d climb the tower and the guy would actually open up the hatch door,” Quintal recalled.

Those places are gone, Quintal acknowledged, but said there’s a “ton of new trails, thanks to the CPC and other organizations. I’ve always supported them, and I think they’re great.”

One of the final questions of the afternoon came from the audience, asking the candidates to explain whether, given the town’s financial condition, they would support the purchase and preservation of large parcels, presently under conservation restrictions – such as the Lander’s property along Hedges Pond Road - or allow them to be sold for development.

Mr. Quintal was unequivocal, calling for the town to purchase the Lander’s property and to “keep it open space.’

He argued that it would be less expensive, in the long term, to purchase the property now, than to “try and maintain the infrastructure and everything else that goes with it.”

He further suggested he felt the same about the Atlantic Country Club property.

Canty concluded his response by saying that if it was an ‘either-or’ proposition, he would favor purchasing the property. But Canty suggested that a better solution, going forward, was to be proactive, to be policy-driven as regards where new developments go, or do not go, and not have to react to the choices of others.

When it was her turn, Cavacco said she believed that we should “preserve as much as we can preserve,” then returned to the Holtec property.

Her “high expectations,” Cavacco said, that was that the 1,500 undeveloped acres of the Pine Hill should be “gifted” to Plymouth, because the town had been a good neighbor to the plant.

The final question asked the candidates to offer ways that the town could capitalize on its “enviable portfolio of natural resources, its globally rare ecology, 35 miles of coastline, 450 ponds, and miles of trails, to benefit residents.

This open-ended question seemed to challenge the candidates.

Canty suggested wider distribution of the town’s trail guide, arguing that if townspeople were made aware of these resources – and explored them – that they’d be more likely to advocate for their protection and expansion.

Cavacco focused on family events, such as the blessing of the fleet.

“When I was on the Board there was always a good mix,” Cavacco said, “but I don’t see anything like that anymore. So, it’s something we have to get back to.”

Quintal acknowledged that Plymouth doesn’t “promote ourselves properly, either our history or our ecology, so we should step that up for tourists.”

“The average resident doesn’t know about all the trails we have, so maybe a website for that, or put information into the tax bills, a map, or a list of places,” Quintal suggested.

Vecchi, who came in at the very end of the forum and so was able to only answer this last question, also was short on specifics and, like the others, seem to put Plymouth's natural assets - which were the focus of the forum - in the category of an amenity, not a foundational resource.

"I think we have lost some of our focus on the natural resources," Vecchi said. "We focus on other things and have forgotten this end of the town."

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By most metrics, the first annual PSA candidate's conservation forum was a resounding success. All four candidates committed to participate. The Wildlands Trust 'barn' was packed. Over 20 questions were asked and answered in the two-hour event and led by moderator Love Albrecht Howard, the exchanges were civil from start to finish.

It should come as no surprise though that the members of the sponsoring organization, the PSA – the Plymouth Stewardship Alliance – remain unconvinced that overall, our elected and appointed officials are sufficiently committed to protecting Plymouth's wealth of natural resources.

We believe we need to do much more than promote trails, hold events or add to the town's website, to fully "capitalize" on those resources.

To truly leverage our green wealth, for the benefit of all residents, we need to invest in it, protect it, and give its preservation equal weight when planning the town's future development.

The forum was, at best, a step in the right direction.

To view a video of the entire forum, use this link: <https://bit.ly/4dhj2Na> (forum begins at 00.06.40).