

Mayoral candidates talk tax, law enforcement

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available to address the needs and you realize that it's not there, we do not have the resources here to address those," Parson said.

Hardwick said he is not against the tax but is more concerned about the causes of the poor financial conditions.

"I wish the city had looked at the reasons why are they in such financial shape," Hardwick said. "And I understand that retirement is an expense, but it can't be that it put us in this kind of shape."

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Curtis Hardwick
Candidate for Mayor

Hardwick called for more cuts.

"That's the only thing I've got is I would have liked to have seen some cuts. It's got to be something besides a zoning officer that needs to be done in over a \$2 million budget. I would have voted for it, but I would have said, 'Let's work on it before we voted on it.'"

CITY'S FINANCES

Hardwick said he will review the budget, cut wasteful spending and seek out grants and funding from the federal and state governments.

Hardwick touched upon these issues in regards to

questions about city spending and the City Hall expansion, asking if money has been put in the wrong place.

"The problem was there, to my understanding, there was a grant allotted for the building of the City Hall. And for some reason, that I don't know, is that it expired. So Mayor (Pat) Bell decided to take some money out of the funds, out of the rainy day funds, and complete the building," Hardwick said.

He continued by saying the major purpose of the building was to house 911, on the second floor. The county then, according to Hardwick, decided to build a separate 911 building, causing a lot of money to be spent. Hardwick believes it was partially for a good reason, but to his understanding, he sees the money as having come out of the rainy day fund rather than the grant. He did acknowledge that Parson would know more of the history on that particular topic.

Parson confirmed that the upper half of the City Hall building was originally meant to be a 911 center and there was some grant money, perhaps around \$450,000, issued for the project. There was also a bond issued for \$350,000.

"But the costs just kept accumulating," Parson said. "When we went into this, Mayor Bell thought that we would be able to, through grant money, do that building with very little out of the fund balance at that time. But by the time it was finished, there was some costs that we didn't plan on, there was some funding that we did plan on. So when you put the additional cost that had been planned on along with some funding that did

not take place, then we just wound up having a whole lot (more) money in that building than we anticipated."

POLICE FORCE

When the candidates were questioned about their plans in regards to the police force, Parson said there are 12 full time officers, one of which is a school resource officer while another one is an undercover officer.

"I think everyone would agree that we don't need to do away with anything that would take away from the safety of our children in the school system," Parson said. "And with the drug problem being what it is in this area, we probably need two (undercover officers). Now that takes us down to 10 officers available for administration and patrol. And this is the same number of full time officers there were in 2004."

Parson said records from 1994 to 2004 show a big effort was made to add three more officers to the force to bring the number up to 10 and to increase the number of vehicles so there could be an adequate take-home fleet. She then referred to minutes from May 3, 1999 when Hardwick was mayor. Parson said Hardwick stated that when he came into office, that was his push. Parson further said that Hardwick's concerns then about police officer overtime and patrol cars are the same concerns there are today.

In response, Hardwick said he is proud that he was able to increase the number of officers and take-home vehicles. He said he thinks there were six officers when he came into the office.

Hardwick also said that those in town, including

him, did not realize how bad the drug problem was until some citizens came before them and asked that they do something about it.

"And then we hired more police officers to start doing more patrolling, and we did do quite a bit about drugs," Hardwick said.

FINANCES

Bringing the conversation back to the topic about the budget and financial conditions of Columbia, Hardwick said he wants to figure out why the city, including the police department, got like that in the first place so that he can stop it and fix it.

"Because if we don't stop it, four years from now we may have to raise taxes again," Hardwick said.

"If I'm at home and I lose my job, my spending has

got to go down. I can't keep going at the level I was. And I understand, I do, I know

"If anybody has complained and been on top of the budget over the past years, it has been me..."

June Parson
Candidate for Mayor

that revenue for the city has fallen, but we've just kept spending. It went up at a higher rate. It's got to stop. And for me to sit and tell you everything, I can't because I don't have the

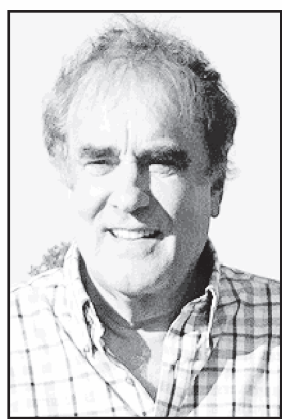
budget in front of me. But I'm telling you nobody will work harder at it than I will," Hardwick said.

Parson agreed there has been some wasteful spending.

"If anybody has complained and been on top of the budget over the past years, it has been me, because I've been saying for several years that we can't keep spending more than we're taking in. And I've voted against the budgets," Parson said.

"Will I do everything I can to make this budget more streamlined? Of course I will. I've been attempting to do that for years," Parson said.

By James D. McIntosh Jr.
james@adairvoice.com



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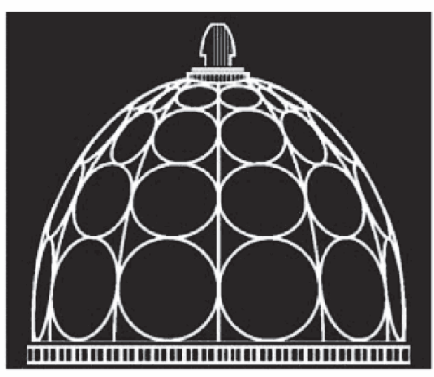
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