



Powered by Clickability



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

## Panel debates Issues 8, 9

### Goal is to help Akron voters understand pros, cons of 'sewers for scholarships'

By Colette M. Jenkins  
Beacon Journal staff writer

Published on Sunday, Oct 19, 2008

Proponents for Akron Issues 8 and 9 went head-to-head during a debate and town hall meeting Saturday to bring clarity to the "sewers for scholarships" issue.

Most of the 100 people at the educational forum, held at the Summit County Red Cross, appeared to have their minds made up about how to vote on the two issues regarding leasing the Akron sewer system to provide money for college scholarships.

Opposing views were held by two city employees — Cheri Cunningham, an assistant law director, and David Head, a sewer department employee.

"We hate 8 but 9 is fine," said Head, quoting the slogan for Issue 9. "The employees in the sewer department don't want to lose their jobs and we don't want to pay higher rates anymore than anyone else. We want the voters to decide what they want done with their city utilities."

Cunningham said that while she understands the fear that some people have when it comes to leasing a public utility, there are guarantees for a rate cap and to protect the quality of service and the 100 jobs in the sewer department.

"It is important that we pass Issue 8 for our children. They represent the future and we need to help them reach their full potential," Cunningham said. "The primary purpose of Issue 8 is to help children further their education after high school. I can't see anything but a positive coming out of this because we're helping our children with a nice economic development tool."

Issue 8 is a charter amendment to lease the sewer system to a private corporation to generate at least \$200 million to fund scholarships for Akron students to attend "participating universities, colleges, technical and trade schools" in the city.

The charter change proposed in Issue 9 would require that any action to sell, lease or transfer a public utility, including the sewer system, be approved by voters. Issue 9 is the result of a petition drive by a citizens group.

The goal of the forum, sponsored by the League of Women Voters of Akron, East Akron Community House and the Akron Bar Association, was to give participants a better understanding of the issues.

The forum included four panelists. Two — Richard Merolla, Akron director of public service, and William Considine, president and chief executive of Akron Children's Hospital — encouraged a vote for Issue 8. The other two — Jack Sombati, campaign chairman of Ohio Council 8 AFSCME Save our Sewer and Water Committee, and Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food & Water Watch — had reservations.

In opposition to Issue 8

Hauter and Sombati said their opposition isn't to scholarships but to the funding source. They criticized the fact that the city does not have a lease in place, and cited problems in other cities where water and sewer systems were managed by private operations.

Those problems include sewage run-off, rate increases, job losses and poor service, they said. Sombati argued that the scholarship plan is actually a loan between the city and the students receiving money.

"If they don't live or work in the city of Akron for 30 years, they have to pay the money back," Sombati said. "It's not a scholarship."

It's a loan. And before you can apply for the money, you have to exhaust all other grants and financial aid."

In favor of Issue 8

Merolla countered that the money would help 1,500 to 1,600 students a year. "If you live or work in Akron, you do nothing. If you leave Akron, you continue to pay the income tax on the wages that you earn," Merolla said. "You can choose to continue to pay the city income tax or pay the money back."

Merolla and Considine said that although a lease is not in place, elements of the city charter guarantee a rate cap of 3.9 percent, which is less than the 4.1 percent increase that sewer customers have historically seen in the last 30 years and protects sewer department workers and customers.

Merolla said if the lessee should breach the contract, the city would take the utility back and keep the \$200 million paid up front. He also said any rate increase would have to be approved by council.

"It's a matter of trust. You have to trust that the mayor and City Council, that has moved this city forward year after year, can manage this contract," Merolla said. "We have not yet decided all of the details of the lease agreement, but nothing in the lease can be contrary to the charter provisions."

Erica Greer, president of the local League of Women Voters, said the forum was not designed to convince those in attendance to vote one way or the other but to provide balanced information to help people make an informed decision before voting.

Questions and answers presented during the town hall portion of the forum will be posted on the League of Women Voters Web site, <http://www.lwvaa.org>.

---

Colette Jenkins can be reached at 330-996-3731 or [cjenkins@thebeaconjournal.com](mailto:cjenkins@thebeaconjournal.com).

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.ohio.com/news/31244799.html>

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright © 2008 Ohio.com