

COUNTY

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“Don’t do that to us,” Smith urged.

“Are you as tired as I am?” asked Melissa Rhodes. Representing Shasta Power, Rhodes denied any accusations of payoffs to landowners by Shasta.

Any regulations, Rhodes continued, will be determined by Mulberry according to their city ordinances. Walden has said he spent hours reading similar ordinances from other cities and counties from around the state to get ideas on how to go about this.

Then Rhodes went on the offensive.

Rhodes went after the “overwhelming” dissent against wind and solar according to the recent comprehensive survey. “The only thing overwhelming from the survey was people who didn’t participate,” she said.

Then she set her sights on those that claim to be protecting the environment, asking where they were when Greenbush built a solar farm or when Girard did the same to lower electricity rates. Are they OK with solar as long as it decreases their utility bill, she wondered?

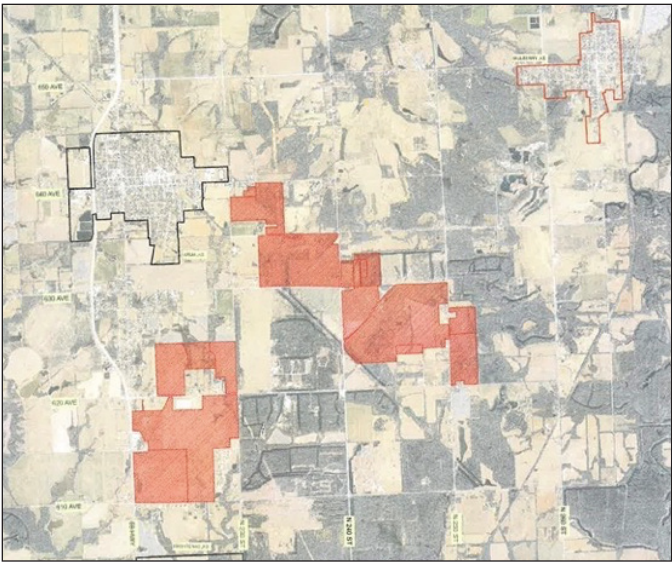
Nobody is complaining about the trash dump, Rhodes said, even though that will go for a thousand years. They say there’s nothing hazardous, and she said she has to trust that is so because that’s what the contracts say, but how does she really know? Where were the people when it came to picking up trash along U.S. 69, she asked?

“It goes both ways,” Rhodes said. “Either you’re for the environment in all aspects, or you’re not.”

Rhodes said she questions their motivations. Are they truly about the environment or do they have a personal issue with people they think are going to make a lot of money, she asked?

Rhodes said this is not a done deal. Shasta still has to jump through a lot of hoops before this becomes a living, breathing development. As of now, Mulberry has no contract with Shasta and the city would have the authority to zone the area how they see fit.

Rhodes brings this detail up because, according to her understanding, during any public hearing the county wants to hold, only the question of annexation is to be discussed. Nothing is to be mentioned about



A map of the proposed Mulberry annexation (shaded in red). The red outlined area is the City of Mulberry. The areas outlined in black are Arma (to the north) and Frontenac (to the south). Franklin is the area immediately to the north and west of the southwestern annexation. COURTESY / CRAWFORD COUNTY

“future development” and Mulberry will be the one to determine what that development will be.

Rhodes asked if Pittsburg had to have a public hearing when it annexed the casino. There was not. County Counselor Jim Emerson said there will be one for this annexation because of the amount of interest.

Rhodes encouraged those landowners outside of the annexation to go to Mulberry and express their concerns. Mayor Walden has repeatedly said he and the city council want to

be good neighbors and are willing to work with those bordering the annexed land.

Those who border the land in question say they want to know that Mulberry has done its due diligence in vetting Shasta, researching the potential hazards of a solar field, creating an emergency plan to respond to a battery fire, and so on.

Opponents spoke about unfulfilled promises made by other developers in the past, particularly in Neosho County, where, they claimed, they promised \$100,000 in revenue per

year for 10 years to a particular city. It has been nearly four years, they said, and the total payout to that city is less than \$100,000 and the county was denied promised funding for equipment and training.

Ann Sanders said the closer to a development a person lives, the more likely they are opposed to the development, to the tune of 12-to-1 against. She is concerned about too many outsiders moving in to buy up land and the public not knowing who these investors are.

Opponents also spoke of a loss of revenue. This can be because of tax deferments granted to the developer. They cited a case in Oklahoma about a farmer who was not allowed to sell his hay crop because of the potential of fiberglass slivers from a wind turbine a mile away.

Judy Prince described a general feeling of distrust in outside developers. They engage in predatory land purchases that target low-income counties that have loose or non-existent zoning laws and have recently decommissioned coal-powered plants, she said.

The county currently has a moratorium on wind and solar development. To opponents

of the annexations, especially those who will live next to the solar farm, this annexation proposal by Mulberry seems like an end-run by Shasta to get around the moratorium.

The commission has 30 days, beginning on Monday, to decide the issue, meaning the deadline is around November 19. Commissioners want to hold a public forum to allow all of those involved to make their case, probably around November 14 (but still to be determined). Among those with a vested interest is not only Mulberry and Shasta Power, but also the cities of Arma and Frontenac, who will be invited to the forum.

The commissioners were also asked to consider an extension of the current moratorium to December 31, 2026.

Residents were encouraged to voice their opinion to the commission. To do so, email your concerns or support to admin@crawfordcountykansas.org. The commissioners are provided with copies of all emails pertaining to this issue.

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FORUM

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gic manner to build a solid foundation for the future, particularly in promoting and supporting small businesses.

The second prepared question asked candidates what their focus would be 10 years out.

Bertoncino said he would focus on revitalizing the downtown, making living in the city center affordable and attractive so that Pittsburg is the first choice for people deciding where to live.

Harris expanded on Bertoncino’s comments saying that affordability should be extended to all of Pittsburg. To grow the affordable housing available, Harris said he would expand the city’s CHIP program, reform residential zoning to allow for more multiple family dwellings and create a rent-to-own program. Harris said he would also look for more creative ways of tax relief, such as reducing property tax burden by increasing sales taxes on luxury goods.

McNay would work with city staff and community leaders to develop a common vision

for the city that would make housing affordable, provide tax relief, expand childcare, and increase wages.

Hite would continue to focus on economic development using the resources the city has at its disposal, such as the revolving loan fund managed by the Economic Development Advisory Council. In just the past three years, not counting 2025, Hite said, the city has invested \$3 million to attract \$95 million in return investments. Continuing to invest in this way would grow the tax base enough to provide property tax relief to residents, he said.

Perry and Brooks both landed on making for the city more affordable for working class families and not overtaxing people. “We can’t always take. Sometimes we have to give something back,” Brooks said.

The first audience question centered on the city’s responsibility to prop up struggling non-profits, such as SEK-CAP, SEK Recycling, and the Humane Society.

Harris pointed out those organizations do fill a needed gap in the community and while

the city should not be the sole supporter, it does have a responsibility, he said, to find some creative solutions, otherwise, the city will ultimately being paying more if these non-profits fail.

McNay followed in the same vein saying that these organizations service the entire county, not just Pittsburg, and therefore the county also has a responsibility to maintain them. If the city were to add them as services, then taxes would have to increase, or other services the city provides would have to be cut.

Hite was more blunt — there is no way the city can add these services to its budget. For them to survive it will take a combined effort with the county to find new and more sustainable funding sources for them.

Brooks and Perry agreed. Brooks added that these entities need to be more fiscally responsible. Perry said he favors supporting them, but not necessarily financially, but would rather explore new ways of funding these services.

Bertoncino agreed that it is not entirely

the responsibility of Pittsburg to support these services, but to allow them to shut down would be a detriment to the city as a whole.

The last question asked how they would make living in Pittsburg more affordable.

McNay favors expanding the CHIP program to build affordable homes for lower- and middle-income families. More homes means more tax revenue available, which means property taxes can be lowered. Building homes under the program also encourages local contractors, creating more jobs for local workers.

Hite remained an advocate for encouraging new businesses to come to Pittsburg. These create new jobs and new tax revenue that can keep property taxes lower across the board, which is good for the economy and everyone living here.

Perry said lowering housing costs and eliminating the sales tax on groceries would be a good start, but overall relief isn’t just about doing one thing, it has to be spread out across the entire budget. Peo-

ple need to be encouraged to live in Pittsburg, especially those that already work here so the outflow of potential tax money is slowed.

Harris agrees with lowering housing costs and believes in continuing to use incentives the city has to secure new investments.

Bertoncino believes it comes from community involvement. The city government must be transparent when considering raising taxes and letting the public know exactly what that tax money is going to be used for.

In their closing arguments, Brooks made a pledge to serve the people of Pittsburg and never backdown or compromise her principles; Perry wants to rebuild the people’s trust in their city government by holding it accountable and being transparent; Harris said he wants to make sure the citizens of Pittsburg have opportunities to better themselves, to work for what they have and not be afraid to lose it.

Hite and McNay focused on the past few years. When Superior closed down in 2008,

hundreds of people lost their jobs and the city took a terrible economic hit. Since then, McNay said, city leaders have focused on diversifying the local economy, guarding against another such downturn to only affect a portion of the local economy, not all of it.

Hite said the bottom line is the past 12 years. The amount of investment brought into the city by the city staff has been astronomical — 18 new businesses in downtown and nearly \$770 million in outside investment — in comparison to the city’s investment of about \$3 million.

“I think smart leadership and community involvement are so key in Pittsburg,” Hite said, “It’s amazing what we get done in our little community of less than 21,000. You want the best for your city. We want the best for our city.”

The full forum can be viewed at the City of Pittsburg YouTube Channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GM3zrpUOW-co>

This reporting is made

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