

HOLYOKE

Mayoral candidates square off in final debate



Mayoral candidates Michael J. Sullivan, right, and Joshua A. Garcia square off last night in a final debate at Holyoke High School's North campus auditorium, hosted by the Holyoke Taxpayers Association. (Dennis Hohenberger photo)

By Dennis Hohenberger

Natural gas moratorium, taxes among topics discussed

Five days before voters cast their ballots, mayoral candidates Joshua A. Garcia and Michael J. Sullivan presented their vision for the Paper City during a televised debate last night at the Holyoke High School North campus auditorium.

Garcia, Blandford's town administrator, and Sullivan, a city councilor, took part in the forum organized by the Holyoke Taxpayers Association. Political consultant Anthony Cignoli moderated the debate and pressed the candidates on issues facing the city.

The candidates tackled taxes, public safety, economic development, public schools, a natural gas moratorium, rehabbing city government and priorities for their administrations.

Cignoli began the debate by citing Holyoke's "unenviable" high commercial tax rate in Massachusetts, now \$40.63 per \$1,000 in valuation. "What specifically will you commit to doing to balance the budget and reduce the tax rates within the city?" he asked.

Garcia said his campaign was focused on management and identity solutions to deliver services efficiently. He added the city must support new businesses that continue to invest in Holyoke.

Sullivan said Garcia did not offer a response to the city's tax rate, which he called "crippling." He called for a reassessment of the commercial properties. Garcia said his plan was part of a larger strategy, including pursuing entities that owe back taxes and fees.

The moderator informed the candidates that Holyoke lost four large-scale development projects, which likely caused the natural gas moratorium on new services imposed by Holyoke Gas and Electric.

Cignoli noted the projects would have bolstered the property tax roll "when that is desperately needed." He asked the candidates if they favored lifting the moratorium and how would they boost natural gas availability?

Sullivan replied he supported lifting the moratorium, which prevented new businesses from opening in Holyoke. He would reengage with the utility and Eversource to increase the supply.

Garcia countered that Sullivan "doesn't get it," and his opponent had no sway in lifting the moratorium.

He noted that Sullivan opposed a Barr Foundation Grant that would have studied the issue. Sullivan argued that opponents wanted to eliminate the use of natural gas.

Cignoli wanted to know the candidates' actual plan on if they would support lifting the moratorium? Garcia reiterated said the city needs to work with Holyoke Gas

and Electric and identify high-use customers.

Sullivan said he would work with Holyoke Gas and Electric and put “mechanisms in place to welcome them back.”

While Holyoke voters overwhelmingly rejected bonding for two middle schools and the city’s public schools remain under state receivership, Cignoli wondered how committed the candidates were to “getting the schools back in the hands of Holyoke” and build a single middle school?

Garcia said he would collaborate with the School Committee and state education officials to ensure goals are being reached to get out of receivership. He would also increase funding and provide more support for teachers.

While he supported the two middle schools, he said the “people had spoken” with the “no” vote.

Sullivan noted that Garcia was a member of the School Committee that hired the superintendent before state receivership. He added that a single middle school was within the city’s budget.

Cignoli pressed the candidates on getting out of receivership.

Sullivan said the state needs to provide clearing goals and

metrics on how Holyoke can get out of receivership. Garcia described Sullivan as “disconnected” and that a communication gap existed in stating those goals.

Cignoli conducted a lightning round, with Sullivan getting the first question. The moderator wanted to know Sullivan’s major goals in the first 90 days in office? Sullivan said he would concentrate on generating green-energy sector jobs.

Garcia said he would focus on budget and department priorities, work with businesses hurt by the ongoing pandemic, and prioritize federal COVID-19 funding.

The moderator pivoted to the city’s park and natural resources.

Garcia said he would “take a deep dive” into the Department of Public Works and Parks and Recreation’s role in maintaining the parks.

Sullivan said the programming was “falling apart,” with some communities offering dozens of summer programs for youth.

Regarding Whiting Street Reservoir, Sullivan said he supported a recently released study on the watershed’s future. Garcia said he wants to protect and maintain the resource, “protect and serve.”

The candidates were asked to explain how they would change the perception of Holyoke as an unsafe place to live.

Garcia said he disagreed with the negative image and did not feel unsafe. He added businesses were investing in Holyoke. Sullivan countered that Holyoke has become dangerous, with crime, drugs and panhandling as ongoing issues.

Garcia replied that the city does have quality of life issues, and he would work with the community to improve conditions. Sullivan said he would work with the police department to increase foot patrols and more vigorous code enforcement.

Regarding retaining city employees, Sullivan wanted to stop the revolving door of incoming and outgoing workers, who treat Holyoke like a training ground for better opportunities. Garcia said the retention and attracting talent problem stems from poor management.

Cignoli asked the candidates how they would improve morale at City Hall and in departments. Sullivan praised acting Mayor Terence Murphy’s outreach efforts. Sullivan said he would listen to all employees and not just managers.

Garcia felt city employees were not respected and would promote more training for workers.

In terms of diversifying the city’s workforce, Garcia said the city was divided by income, with Holyoke’s Latino population greatly affected by the disparities. However, he added he would appoint residents to boards that represent Holyoke.

Sullivan said he would encourage all Holyokers to participate in the community. “We hurt ourselves when we don’t get as many voices heard as possible,” he said.