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Mayor candidates touch on housing

Vermont Town Meeting Day

By John Briggs, Free Press Staff Writer

Burlington's four major mayoral candidates met again Thursday in a formal debate, and after 90 minutes of rapid-fire questions in an AARP-sponsored forum at the Hilton Burlington on Battery Street, moved to a Neighborhood Planning Assembly forum at the Heineberg Senior Center.

Next week, the candidates — Progressive Mayor Bob Kiss; Democratic Councilor Andy Montroll; independent Dan Smith; and Council President Kurt Wright, a Republican — have debates Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

Thursday, as has been true throughout the campaign, the candidates were serious, well-informed, articulate and polite to each other.

They agreed the city needs more senior housing and should make sure the two senior centers, always hard-pressed for operating funds, stay open.

On that issue, Kiss suggested the city, which provided \$75,000 this year in General Fund money to the centers, might have to turn to a special tax, such as the Penny for Parks tax voters approved in November to pay for park maintenance.

Kiss opposed that parks tax, and he was the only candidate to suggest that approach. Smith, in keeping with his "grow-the grand list" theme, said an expanded tax base would generate more money for many of the city's needs.

Wright said the General Fund help was appropriate and should have been done before the senior-center "crisis" of the last year.

Montroll said the city should work with the centers to find grant money but use General Fund money to keep them from closing. "We can't let that happen," he said.

Asked whether the city's system for building affordable housing worked well, Smith answered, "No," and said the just-completed zoning ordinance failed to support the level of density the city needs.

Wright said the city needs to re-examine "every tool we use" and look to the example of cities such as South Burlington. He didn't provide specifics.

Montroll agreed with Smith and Wright that the city needs a variety of new housing but said the first step to improvement would be a citywide inventory to understand what sites are available and what kind of housing might go in each. Such an inventory would simplify the permitting process, he said.

Kiss said the city needs help from the state and federal governments, but said the city has "done a fantastic job" in creating affordable housing.

