

# Port Townsend City Council hopefuls debate

Housing, budget and deer addressed

By Diane Urbani de la Paz

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PORT TOWNSEND — The deer started the discussion.

With scores of does, fawns and bucks walking and eating through Port Townsend's neighborhoods, the ruminants were the first topic Thursday night during the Port Townsend City Council candidates' forum.

The event, presented on Zoom and broadcast on KPTZ-FM, focused on the one council race in the Aug. 3 primary election: Position 5, with Sky Hardesty-Thompson, 39, Tyler Myles Vega, 44, and Libby Urner Wennstrom, 58, running.

The question, posed by moderator Janette Force: There have been reports of aggressive behavior by deer; what should the City Council do about them?

"I personally know two people who had to go to the ER because of deer encounters," said Wennstrom, a 23-year resident of Port Townsend. Other cities have used contraception to control wildlife, she added, while she believes public outreach could help here, to educate residents about how feeding deer can lead to bad behavior.

"I don't think we're going to introduce wolves" Uptown, she quipped.

"When I first moved here, I saw more coyotes and less deer," said Hardesty-Thompson, who arrived in Port Townsend a decade ago.

“I don’t have an answer, but I would love to get into that and do some research.”

The response from Vega, a longtime peace activist: “We’re the invasive species. We’re the ones causing the problem, not the deer ... we’re the ones who’ve taken away this habitat.” A range of solutions should be on the table, he said, including contraception.

## Housing

Next came another question from the list the forum’s hosts, the League of Women Voters of Jefferson County and the American Association of University Women-Port Townsend, compiled with input from the public. The candidates were asked to describe their personal interactions with homeless people.

“I talk to them every day,” Hardesty-Thompson said.

“Every single person who’s homeless needs an advocate ... to find out what their needs are.”

“When you start listening to people who are marginalized, you’ll find they have a dream,” Vega said. Given a place to live, “they’re going to figure out a direction.”

Wennstrom, voicing agreement with both of her fellow candidates about the “housing first” philosophy, said she personally knows a handful of families who live in their campers or sleep on friends’ couches. They’ve been financially devastated by medical crises or other problems, she said.

What should the City Council do about this, specifically?

“The golf course really figures into this conversation,” Vega began. The city course has space for housing, he believes — it’s “a no-brainer,” along with the need for more high-density zoning to allow tiny houses in yards.

“I myself have a basement,” he said, that could provide housing. But he doesn’t have the money to turn it into a finished apartment.

“A lot of people say, ‘I don’t want denser housing in my neighborhood,’” added Wennstrom, a self-employed technical writer. She suggested

reframing the issue, and asking residents if they would welcome a duplex — instead of a single-family home — in the empty lot at the end of their street it meant affordable housing for essential workers.

Hardesty-Thompson, who has held a variety of jobs before taking time off for health reasons, offered an idea for revenue generation.

“With housing prices going through the roof,” he said, “Realtors are making huge commissions ... I think 1 percent or 2 percent countywide or citywide, going towards funding housing; the housing issue in general, is a drop in the bucket for those commissions.”

### City budget

Force turned the discussion to the city budget. What’s one expenditure, she asked the candidates, that you would increase, decrease or change?

One after the other, the three admitted they had not delved into the budget. Then Wennstrom, a former journalist, noted that the city has “different buckets of money” for various spending categories, and Hardesty-Thompson said seawater desalination is something Port Townsend should look into.

“I don’t have anything to add to this conversation,” Vega said.

In their closing statements, the candidates gave a mix of prepared statements and relatively spontaneous ones.

“We’re in cooperation and we’re solving problems, and I want to give a shout-out to Sky and Libby for being at the table,” Vega said.

“We’re solving problems even though we have some pretty significant differences, and that’s totally fine,” he said.

Wennstrom thanked her rivals too, then gave her statement.

“Local politics matter,” she said. “I’m a coalition builder who looks for practical solutions and common ground ... the actions we take today will shape how well the city we love works for our children and grandchildren.”

“I chose to not prepare a statement. I wanted to see how the event went,”

Hardesty-Thompson said, adding his thanks to Wennstrom and Vega.

“Housing for our workers and homelessness in our town, and the rampant drug use that I feel a lot of people are unaware of” are his principal reasons for running.

“I feel that the council needs a change of just how it’s been operating, and it needs new people, new ideas,” Hardesty-Thompson said, adding he feels now is the time “to finally jump in. I’ve been wanting to do this since I moved here.”

Ballots for the Aug. 3 primary election, which also include races for fire district commissioners and school board members, will be mailed out to voters July 14. Residents who haven’t yet registered to vote can do so online or by mail by July 26 — or in person at the Jefferson County Courthouse, 1820 Jefferson St., all the way through Election Day. For information, see [co.jefferson.wa.us](https://co.jefferson.wa.us) and use the “Elections” link under Quick Links, or contact voter registration coordinator Sandi Eldridge at 360-385-9119 or [seldridge@co.jefferson.wa.us](mailto:seldridge@co.jefferson.wa.us).

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Jefferson County senior reporter Diane Urbani de la Paz can be reached at 360-417-3509 or [durbanidelapaz@peninsuladailynews.com](mailto:durbanidelapaz@peninsuladailynews.com).



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