

KONK Life

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Hometown! kicks off 2018 political season

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It's more than 400 days until ballot boxes reopen for the 2018 state and local elections in Monroe County. But multiple candidates threw their hats into the political ring on April 3 at a Call for Candidates sponsored by Hometown!, the non-partisan political education group.

Several incumbents announced they will be running for reelection, including Monroe County School Board members Bobby Highsmith and John Dick. And Monroe County Commissioner David Rice, who represents the Middle Keys, also will run for reelection.

But it was the first-time candidates that drew the most enthusiastic applause from the audience. With Key West Mayor Craig Cates stepping down next year because of term limits – although he joked that the city attorney had found a way for him to run again – the open seat drew two election neophytes at the Hometown! meeting. Dave Gonzales and Monroe Holloway each gave a brief overview of their campaign platforms.

“We have to have income,” said Gonzales, a 20-year Navy veteran. “But the tourist economy has to merge with our way of life. We must protect our heritage.”

Holloway, 31, works in the service industry in Key West as a front desk clerk at Southernmost Beach Hotel. He said he has seen first-hand how difficult it is for service industry professionals to live in the city, struggling with low wages and the high cost of housing and child care.

“A lot of us in the service industry, we wear it as a badge of honor to survive here. We don't have a sustainable community when people are leaving every week. And that's true for a millennial or senior citizen,” he said.

There had been rumors that Key West City Commissioner Jimmy Weekley would run for mayor, a position he has held in the past. But saying he wanted to encourage people on the political sidelines to run, Weekley put that rumor to rest.

“I am not, in no way or form, running for mayor of Key West,” he said.

“That actually was a surprise,” said Hometown! Chairman Todd German about Weekley's announcement.

Another young, first-time candidate, Giancarlo Espinosa, got the crowd cheering when he announced he will run against incumbent U.S. Representative Carlos Curbelo (R). The 30-year-old Espinosa said that he had received his American citizenship only 18 months ago, but is “pretty much going all in” for the 2018 election. He said one of his issues will be to represent individuals and small businesses in meeting the health care challenge.

“Why are they having to fundraise and beg on the street to be healthy,” Espinosa said about Florida residents. “It’s very early [in the election process] but hopefully this will start people talking about the issues.”

Three Key West City Commission seats are on the 2018 ballot. Commissioner Sam Kaufman was the only one to attend the Call for Candidates, announcing his candidacy for reelection by holding up a campaign sign from his first election and joking that it felt like his victory party was only a short time ago. Commissioners Richard Payne and Margaret Romero are also up for reelection but did not attend the event.

Kaufman may have a challenger for his seat. Oliver Kofoid, a two-time candidate for the Florida Keys Mosquito Control board, said he is considering a run for Kaufman’s district 2 seat. “It might be my one and only chance to stick it to a lawyer,” he said to laughter, referring to attorney Kaufman.

And Sunny Andracchio said he is considering a run for city commission but did not specify what seat.

With Monroe County Commissioner George Neugent saying he may not run for reelection, two candidates stepped up to replace him, local CPA Chuck Weitzel and Take Stock in Children Program Manager Chuck Licis. And District 4 County Commissioner David Rice also announced his intent to run for reelection.

The Keys Energy Utility Board also drew interest. Incumbent Charlie Bradford said he is not sure whether he will run again. But two candidates stepped up to run for the newly-created seat on the board to represent the Middle Keys. Cudjoe Key resident Walt Dabrinski said he has spent 40 years in the electric industry as a management consultant and electric engineer. And Greg Daniels pointed to his two terms on the Keys Energy Advisory Committee as political qualifications. Daniels also said he has worked with both Keys Energy and the Florida Keys Energy Cooperative, which provides electricity to users north of the Seven Mile Bridge, as a construction coordinator for Comcast.

“I’ve worked with both [electric providers]. I know how they both work,” he said.

Hometown! decided to hold its Call for Candidates a little earlier than usual in order to tap into the heightened political climate caused by Donald Trump’s controversial election. That was the reason Stacy Hannah and her daughter Rose Murtha were sitting in a corner table at Salute. Murtha, 20, supported Bernie Sanders in the campaign, her first presidential election. “I’m angry,” she said when asked why she was at the Call for Candidates. “I want to be more involved.” Her mother had similar reasons.

“I watched her [Murtha] get really, really into [the presidential campaign]. And then watched her get so devastated... It’s really challenged me to get involved,” Hannah said.