

NEWS

A unique approach

Council candidate promises constituents a chance to have input prior to his votes in council

By Ben Karp
Special to the Sentinel

Bill Jacobs is taking a unique approach in his county council campaign by promising to have constituents determine his voting record through online ballots if he wins.

Jacobs, a Democrat running in a crowded field for at-large seats, bills himself as an Athens Project candidate. The Athens Project is an organization he created June 2005 to promote "direct democracy advocacy." The organization's plan is to support any candidate seeking office in the U.S. that pledges to vote purely on the majority will of the constituency. Jacobs is currently the only candidate running under the Athens Project, but Jacobs says there is interest from as far away as Oregon.

Jacobs began Athens while reading "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" by Joe Trippi, Howard Dean's former campaign manager. The book deals with the intersection between the internet and democracy.

Though he hasn't solicited any monetary donations with his Internet-focused campaign, he has found residents willing to help and an endorsement from state Delegate Karen Montgomery (D-District 14).

Under Jacob's plan, residents would receive user IDs via postal mail using voter registration databases. When a potential bill is announced, Jacobs would post it on a website allowing feedback and public discussion. Users would be able to change their online vote up until the council vote is taken. Jacobs' vote would be determined by simple majority.

Jacobs says the cost estimates for the system go up to \$15,000. He plans to use resources allotted to council members to support the system, though it may not be enough.

"If I have to pay for it out of my own pocket I will," Jacobs said.

Nancy Floreen (D-at-large) currently serves on the council and says Jacobs' approach is "interesting." But she says, it "defeats the nature of the representative process."

Jacobs says this is his intention. He would like to see the council, and in a broader sense the U.S. government, act more as a democra-



Bill Jacobs

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cy than a republic. He reiterates this point in an interview by referring to his desired position on the council as a "direct democracy conduit."

Floreen questions elements of the plan. She says most council work is done in committees. In the development committee, for exam-

as transparent as possible.

Floreen says the council represents its constituents with adequate input through staff reports, comments from the public and other council members.

"We get a lot of testimony. Frankly, our public process doesn't end until the moment we vote," she said.

Referring to the oft-cited criticism of the council's ties to developers, Jacobs says, "If (the council) gets public input, it doesn't show. Dumb things are getting passed. If the public approves of these dumb things, that doesn't show."

Though Jacobs shows a strong understanding of county poli-

tics--his platform contains specific ideas for managing growth, education and limiting special interest influence--he does not regularly attend council meetings. His campaign seems to be about ideals of democracy.

"I'm not winning, I know that," Jacobs said.

But he says that if in the next election cycle there are additional candidates running as direct democracy conduits, he has been successful.

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BILL JACOBS
County Council Candidate

ple, text amendments often hinge on details and require "word-smithing." Council work requires flexibility, and it would often be hard to solicit community comments.

"I don't see this working," Floreen said. "There's the complexity of the issues."

In cases where it would be thoroughly impractical to solicit comments, Jacobs says, "I'm going to have to use my common sense." Jacobs says in these cases he will be