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Three 40 Below questions for the candidates

Magnarelli and Mahoney talk about how to plug the 'brain drain'

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By Emily Kulkus
Daily Dose editor

If you are at least 18 years old and live in Onondaga County, you have a very important duty tomorrow.

The job of Onondaga County Executive, which controls a \$1.15 billion budget and oversees 4,200 people, is about to be vacated by Nicholas Pirro, who has held the office since 1987. (That was the same year "Lethal Weapon" was released and Michael Jackson topped the charts with "Bad," by the way.)

By exercising your right to vote on Election Day, you have the opportunity to be the boss and pick who you think is best for the job.

On Nov. 19, 40 Below hosted a "meet the candidates" night with about 50 people at Ambrosia in Armory Square. During the meeting, attendees were able to submit questions to candidates Bill Magnarelli and Joanie Mahoney. Of the 16 questions submitted, three were chosen and discussed with the group. Here, Democratic candidate Magnarelli and Republican candidate Mahoney share their responses in writing.

Read their answers and visit www.syracuse.com/politics to make sure you're voting for the candidate tomorrow who best meets your needs. — Emily Kulkus, Daily Dose editor

Magnarelli:

1. What can the county do to improve our city neighborhoods and encourage young people to own homes and live in the city?

We have to work on several issues in order to strengthen our neighborhoods and make it easier and more desirable for young people to own homes and live in the city. First of all, we have to make sure that our schools are strong and integrated into the community. The West Side Initiative has focused on the importance of creating community schools — places to learn that are part of the fabric of the neighborhood. This initiative has to be supported and expanded. If we have strong, quality schools, younger people will be willing to raise families in the city.

Second, fighting crime is critical to improving neighborhoods. People want to live in places where they feel safe. I recently released my public safety platform, which can be found on my Web site at www.magnarelli.com, and I have made clear that reducing crime is essential for neighborhood development and for economic development of our entire county. We have to make sure that all of our law enforcement agencies continue working together on improving neighborhood safety.

Third, we have to make sure that downtown is an accessible, safe, well-lit and exciting place to be. I will work aggressively to resolve our parking issues downtown right away, and I will think creatively about how we can use public transportation to bring people downtown. Our arts and cultural venues offer many fun opportunities that make downtown living more exciting, and they contribute to the downtown neighborhood.

I would also like to note that I have worked very hard with the city and Syracuse University to make the Connective Corridor a reality, including the recently announced \$10 million New York State Assembly grant for that purpose.

Finally, we have to make sure that the housing stock in the city, which is some of the oldest in the county, is taken care of. I sponsored the New York state law that allowed the City to offer property owners a partial exemption for the cost of renovations that improve their property. We also have to fight for a bigger share of the millions of dollars that are available from the state and federal government to revitalize neighborhoods. I have proposed creating a grants office in the county that would be specifically charged with seeking out grants and obtaining them.

2. What steps can the county take to help promote the city image to both businesses and residents — realizing that what is good for the city is good for the region (including all towns and villages)?

From what I have seen and heard, our community realizes that the city, county, and region are part of a connected whole. Part of the way to promote the city image to businesses and residents is to improve parking, safety, and neighborhoods, as was addressed in the first question, and to make sure that our downtown is a thriving neighborhood once again.

However, there is another issue raised by this question that I think is great, and that is the idea of marketing our city, Onondaga County and the entire region. This is something I have been working on for several years now. I have been supporting the creation of a Web portal for the Central New York Creative Core, which is a joint marketing effort in the neighboring 12-county region, to share the message that Central New York is a “real, smart and easy” place to live. This effort is promoting the many wonderful assets we have here to the entire world.

Many of our businesses and our universities have joined in promoting the “green apple” of Central New York on their literature, and it’s created a real sense of excitement in this community. As county executive, I would expand on this effort by making Onondaga County a more active partner in this process.

I have also been a strong supporter of the Convention and Visitors Bureau through state grants in the amount of \$50,000 this year to market the city and the county. As County Executive, I would continue to work together with the Convention and Visitors Bureau to make sure that our county’s facilities, arts and cultural venues, and natural parks are promoted to the world so that people know what a great place Onondaga County is to live, work and play.

3. What role do you envision young adults and young professionals playing in your administration, from either an advisory standpoint or leadership positions in county government?

My administration will be representative of our entire community, and that will naturally include young adults and young professionals. If we hope to keep and attract young adults in Onondaga County, we have to talk to them about what issues are important to them, and as county executive, I will make sure that all of our county departments do that.

The county employs about 4,000 workers, and there will be many young adults who will not be working directly in my administration, but I also want them to have input into what the county is doing. I have made it clear that I will make sure county government is run more openly with greater opportunities for public input, and I hope that young adults will seize on those opportunities to make their views known.

Mahoney:

1. What can the county do to improve our city neighborhoods and encourage young people to own homes and live in the city?

There's a lot that Onondaga County government can do to encourage young people to own homes and live in the city.

The first thing we can do is to attack the problem of urban blight. This may seem like an insignificant problem, but urban blight is a major quality of life issue that leads to many other problems. By creating clean and attractive neighborhoods, we can create urban environments that young people would be happy to live in. Right now, we lose many of these young people to cities like Boston and Philadelphia where city neighborhoods are vibrant and attractive. By revitalizing our city neighborhoods, we can begin to turn this around.

The second thing that must happen, and the overriding issue in this campaign, is economic development. A growing economy will create the high-paying jobs that our young people need in order to afford the lifestyle they are looking for. And rapid economic growth will also expand our tax base, thereby allowing us to reduce property taxes and help make home ownership attractive and affordable for young people.

2. What steps can the county take to help promote the city image to both businesses and residents — realizing that what is good for the city is good for the region (including all towns and villages)?

As I have said throughout this campaign, when elected I will get out from behind the desk and go sell Onondaga County — with the city of Syracuse at its core — to businesses throughout the country and the world. We have a great story here in Onondaga County and the region around us. We need to get out there and tell this story. Government leaders and other leaders in our community cannot sit by the phone and wait for companies to call us to relocate their businesses here. That's just not going to happen.

A few years ago, my husband Marc Overdyk put together a business plan and shopped it around the country to the major energy companies. One of the key components of his plan was that the operation would be located in Syracuse. He and his team managed to convince Shell Oil to open their northeast trading headquarters in Syracuse — originally in our garage but eventually downtown — resulting in dozens of high paying jobs.

Shell would never have picked Syracuse on their own. They had to be sold on Syracuse. Their decision has worked out very well for them and they now know that they made the right choice. I see this as a model for how we — as a county, a city and a region — should approach economic development.

3. What role do you envision young adults and young professionals playing in your administration — from either an advisory standpoint or leadership positions in county government?

You will certainly see young adults and young professionals in important positions in my administration. I intend to hire the best and the brightest people I can find to help me bring a fresh start to Onondaga County government. Some of these people will be "old hands" who know how county government works and will help us make a smooth transition. But I will also be looking for people of all ages who can bring new ideas and energy to local government.

As we all know, one of the huge problems this County has faced in recent years is the so-called "brain drain." Too many young people are leaving Central New York for opportunities elsewhere — opportunities that should exist in Onondaga County and the city of Syracuse. One of the best ways to keep our young people here is to get them involved in the effort to improve our

community. Our young people are key stakeholders in the future of Central New York. I hope that getting them involved in helping me be an effective County Executive will help convince them to build their own futures here in Onondaga County.

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