

Councilman to challenge Priebe for mayor

By TOM TIGANI

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TAYLOR — Councilman Jeffrey Lamarand believes it's time for all of the city's elected officials to be on the same team. That's among the chief reasons he's surrendering his council seat and running solo for the city's top job in November, when he'll square off against incumbent Mayor Cameron Priebe, who is running with a slate of candidates.

"After four years of being on the council, I've had chance to see how things are operating," said Lamarand, who was elected in 2005, "and I'd like to take a different approach and put taxpayers' money to better use."

He cites team politics and cronyism under the current and past administrations as leading to situations in which taxpayer money has been and is being wasted.

Some of that money has gone to health care benefits for council members and their families, Lamarand said, adding that the practice will end for members elected in the fall because of a resolution he proposed earlier this year to end the "fringe benefit gravy train."

However, he said, while future elected council members no longer will be eligible for either the benefits or the payments in lieu of benefits, the current council declined to waive even payment of the latter for themselves.

Lamarand said he had declined the benefits and was receiving extra payment on top of his council salary. However, he added, that when he tried to decline the payments in lieu of insurance, it took several months before officials finally told him just to write a letter officially doing so.

For some former council members and their families, Lamarand said, it was an "extra perk" instead of Medicare health benefits.

"My question was, how did they ever become eligible?" he said. "It's because of team politics. There's nothing in that decision that benefits taxpayers. That's abuse of trust, if you ask me.

"If we're going to go to our bargaining groups and ask them to take cuts, certainly we should be leading by example."

In his four years, Lamarand said, the city has not actually run a balanced budget, but instead has seen a fund balance of \$6 million get wiped away by a council that never has made any hard decisions.

"We saw some clouds coming and used our rainy day fund," he said. "Now it's actually going to rain."

Part of the reason for what's happened, Lamarand said, is that there are just two meetings a year in which council members review the budget. That doesn't give them much chance to develop relationships with department heads, who can provide details on budget questions.

And because those department heads are appointed by the mayor, Lamarand said, they're often "treading on thin ice" politically as to what kinds of information they're giving out.

"When department heads ask, 'Why do you want to know?' in public, that's a problem," he said. "There's no transparency. They've got to worry about getting fired. But it's the public's information, not their information."

As a council member, Lamarand said he's tried to do what he can to make the process more visible. In his second year of budgets, he said, he proposed a budget that was adopted for a week that included money from a pending sale of cell phone towers and used it ahead of schedule based on "not very firm" numbers that administrators had given the council.

Shortly afterward, Lamarand said, word came out of a mayor's team meeting that including the sale money in the budget was "irresponsible."

"They said we don't have any of that money yet; we make adjustments as we go," he said, adding that the council then adopted a budget that was \$2 million more in expenditures than revenues.

"I said, 'Let's do it when we run out of money, not at the beginning of the year,'" Lamarand said.

The sale of the cell towers eventually did get completed, he said, and the money that came May 30 of that fiscal year would have made his budget work, except that the council didn't find out about it until December.

"We're not handling money the best way," Lamarand said.

A better way that he said he would try to implement as mayor would be to give council members a list of items for the coming year and ask them to help set priorities and be accountable for them.

That could help put an end to the candidate "teams" that he believes are becoming outdated in the city.

"How do you try to fight something when you're being provided all the tools necessary to make a decision?" Lamarand asked.

As for accusations that he's been on a team himself because he accepted the endorsement of former Mayor Gregory Pitoniak in 2005, Lamarand said he would have been "crazy" not to take it and warned Pitoniak not to expect automatic support on every issue, adding that Pitoniak said he understood.

Lamarand, who has taught government at Crestwood High School in Dearborn Heights for 10 years, sees no problem working as mayor with those who are or have been members of other teams.

"All those people are people I've already been working with for the last four years," he said. "I hope and it is my belief that the interests of the city will take over."