

Office Hopefuls Spar



Natalie Tennant, left, Joe DeLong and Bill Wayne Bailey speak at a forum at Shepherd University on Wednesday evening for Secretary of State's Office candidates. (Journal photo by Edward Marshall)

By Beth Henry
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SHEPHERDSTOWN — Voter confidence and online government access were two issues that topped discussion at a Wednesday forum between candidates for the West Virginia Secretary of State's Office.

Democratic candidates Bill Wayne Bailey, Joe DeLong and Natalie Tennant participated in the hour-long debate at Shepherd University, which was sponsored by The Journal, WEPM Radio and the Eastern Panhandle Alumnae Chapter of the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

The winner of the Democratic primary on May 13 will face unopposed Republican candidate Charles Minimah in the Nov. 4 general election. Current Secretary of State Betty Ireland chose not to run for re-election after serving a four-year term.

During Wednesday's event, Bailey, DeLong and Tennant were each given the opportunity to respond to a range of questions from three panelists about the Secretary of State's Office and their intentions if elected. Two of the office's duties include overseeing elections and business licensing, although the office also handles many other tasks.

Bailey said his 18 years of experience in the state Legislature, including the past 14 years as Senate majority whip, have helped him learn all about a variety of issues that are important to the state

office, such as financial affairs, communication and leadership.

He placed a great deal of emphasis on the protection of voters' rights, and the importance of encouraging citizen involvement.

"Everyone should vote ...," he said during his opening statements. "We all feel that the Fourth of July is Independence Day, but the real Independence Day is Election Day."

DeLong, who is the House majority leader in the state Legislature, said some of the issues he will focus on if elected include expanding the technology and online capabilities of the office, as well as helping protect people's identities.

He also supported the need for improved communication between the Secretary of State's Office and all county clerks in West Virginia, who handle voter registration and elections at the local level.

"We just need to be a resource in order to make sure (county clerks) have the tools and resources they need," DeLong said.

Tennant also stressed the importance of improved communication, and she said she can bring her experience as a businesswoman and former television broadcaster to the position, as well as new ideas and enthusiasm for public service.

She pointed out that as voting systems have become electronic, the Secretary of State's Office should make sure that the electronic voting machines are secure and that all voters feel comfortable enough to use them.

"We as West Virginians deserve to have confidence in our voting system," she said.

All three candidates supported increased education programs for voters, better communication with counties and different ways to encourage diversity and improved participation with poll workers.

They also supported better programs for entrepreneurs and increased capabilities for businesses to file paperwork and pay fees online.