

Working Families Win held a forum with the candidates for Reading City Council. Rei Encarnacion, Vaughn Spencer, Rafael Nunez and Donna Reed attended.

These written responses to the prepared questions were submitted:

Question 1 Privatization has been one option considered by municipal governments for reducing costs. What is your position on the privatization of city services and jobs and what are the benefits of maintaining unionized public service jobs?

Rei Encarnacion – Candidate for City Council President

It is not an option, privatization will only hurt our community because the private sector will eventually rise prices for profit; in regards to unions, it is always good to have representation that will protect the interest of the working class in an ethical and moral way, but the unions aren't the problem, the need of services is the issue at a reasonable cost, services that should be provided with quality.

Vaughn Spencer – Candidate for City Council President

From his website:

Spencer on Crime Fighting

- Endorsed Project Safe Neighborhood
- Support community policing initiative, crime watch, Weed and Seed Program, VIPER
- Work with the School District to curb truancy and gang/violence

“A safe city is my top priority.”

Spencer on City's Appearance

- Continue and improve citywide trash collection program
- Enforce littering ordinance
- Tackle graffiti
- More aggressive codes and zoning enforcement
- Demolish dilapidated structures
- Preserve our historic districts

“Let's make our City a place we can be proud to call home.”

Spencer on Economic Development

- Supported the Goggleworks, IMAX Theatre and Buttonwood Gateway Project
- Expand home ownership initiatives
- Attract new businesses to the City and create jobs
- Teamed up with Chambers of Commerce and business leaders to market/promote the City

“Let's revive our economy.”

Rafael Nunez – Candidate for Council District 5

Privatization is not even worth considering as far as I am concerned. Why would we privatize a resource to our city? When you privatize our services we no longer control or have any input into how services are provided to

our citizen's. Look at the current situation with the Reading Water Authorization. Not allowing people to do payment plans with it gets to the Accounts Recovery Bureau. People losing their homes because their house was placarded because a payment plan was not allowed. We have to bring those services back as well as keep whatever services we can.

Donna Reed – Candidate for Council District 5

I know what it feels like to lose a job and many of my colleagues at a former place of employment are coping with either losing their jobs or facing dramatic cuts in salaries. These are difficult, difficult times.

Privatization – when it comes to essential government services, I'd rather not see that. For instance, when it comes to the water authority, I am absolutely opposed to privatization. Costs could spiral out of control and that's unacceptable. Water should flow as inexpensively as possible – it is essential to all our lives and well being.

Union jobs – work like crazy to keep them, but not at the cost of others' well being. There are many people like me who have never worked for unions but whose life work is every bit as important and essential. These people – the majority of Americans – should also have someone looking out for them.

Benefits of maintaining these and any other jobs – is keeping families well supported and united under a fitting roof and with the essentials for life and good health.

Reading City Council candidate question 2 With loss of tax base and growing need for municipal services, the City of Reading faces a severe financial crisis. How would you reach out to the Berks County government and Reading School District to cooperate in respect to cost sharing for law enforcement, water, sewer, recreation and library services?

Rei Encarnacion – Candidate for City Council President

Municipal cooperation is all about partnering for a better city of Reading. Many local governments, in their search for new methods of reducing costs and maintaining services, are reviewing their service delivery systems, setting priorities and determining which services can be provided through arrangements with other local public entities or partners, which would be a great way to reducing cost.

I would reach out for help but not if the loss to the citizens of Reading is greater than the help being provided. In plain words I don't want the help of any governmental body if they are going to take complete control of our assets. The future of our city depends on what we have in assets to pass on to our children not what we give away.

One opportunity to reduce our costs is to work together to maximize our existing resources and to provide our services as efficiently as possible.

We should start conversation in regards to cooperation on a contract basis or for the provision of a joint service agreement.

Basically stated, governments may perform any function or service jointly which they may perform individually. This gives government officials wide latitude to develop joint activities and to enter into contractual agreements to provide the necessary services efficiently and economically. Legislation has been

adopted over the years permitting municipal cooperation and the sharing of services in specific areas in other cities.

Vaughn Spencer – Candidate for City Council President

See issues from website above

Rafael Nunez – Candidate for City Council President

I have always believed that there are many services being paid by our county, city and school district that can be done by our outstanding tax base debtors. I believe that we can have them do community service to pay off their outstanding debts. This would allow each administration to now focus those monies on other services of importance. This would create a win/win. We could now bring back the tax collection from Portnoff Law Group and keep it in house ensuring payment of debt via services rendered.

Donna Reed – Candidate for Council District 5

As we stand on the brink of Act 47, the City can no longer act in a provincial way when it comes to our financial status. Make no mistake, we can no longer stand on our own.

We need to reach out to whatever realistic partners there are. The school district is the obvious one. With the millions upon millions of dollars lavished by the state on the school district, it only realistic for that entity to assume recreational programs for our youth. If the district refuses, the city needs to look to quasi-public organizations.

Parks. My belief is that all municipalities should fold their parks system into a regional county network. The parks belong to all citizens and the cost should be shared. Regionalization would cut administrative costs and perhaps put more workers in place.

Law enforcement. We have a great police force and strong chief who have made real strides in fighting crime. The city offers expertise that the inner ring municipalities could use these days. I believe in the benefits of regional police forces – I would see one with Reading at the core, perhaps four other regional forces in the more rural parts of Berks.

Water authority. Likely, we'll need to ultimately look at regionalization. I don't see that in the immediate future.

Sewer/wastewater treatment. That's the \$250 to \$400 million elephant in the room. The city can not and should not foot the full bill. We simply can't. We need a regional organization representing the different municipalities that depend on the plant. The sooner the better.

Times have changed – in 1998, the city general fund budget totaled \$39.9 million with property tax providing 34.4 percent or \$13.5 million. Flash forward to 2008 – a \$71.6 million general fund budget with property tax accounting for \$14 million or 20 percent.

Consider just this: from 2003 to 2007, public safety personnel expenses grew by \$12 million while personnel numbers remained nearly consistent. (Salaries up by 28 percent, benefits costs up by 81 percent, pension costs up 176 percent.)

Other pension costs – depending on departments – rose between 745 percent and 923 percent. That all comes from your tax dollars.

While additional fees have been added over the years, we can no longer increase taxes.

E.G. – Regarding earned income tax, city residents pay a higher percentage of their income compared to most other Berks municipalities. The per capita income tax paid by city residents in 2005 was \$107 compared to \$81 elsewhere, a differential of 1.3 times. Per capita property tax was also out of kilter -- \$185 per capital in Reading versus \$86 elsewhere.