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Holschuh, Yagong vie for council seat

Two candidates discuss reasons why they should be elected

by Jason Armstrong  
*Tribune-Herald Staff Writer*

A candidate familiar to Hamakua voters will continue representing them on the Hawaii County Council.

That's because the two-way race for the 1st District seat involves Councilman Fred Holschuh and his immediate predecessor, former Councilman Dominic Yagong.

Once friends and now increasingly bitter opponents, Holschuh has represented Hamakua since 2002, while Yagong was the area's councilman for three straight terms starting in 1996.

Yagong, 46, left politics to raise his family and advance his career in retail management. He's now returning in hopes of providing the local leadership he says is needed. A sports broadcaster and "voice of the Honokaa Dragons," Yagong works as district manager for Kalama Beach Corp. and Food Pantry Ltd.

Yagong said his approach will be to remain involved in his community, citing his work with the Honokaa Western Weekend and as Honokaa Elementary School Association president.

"You need to be visible in the community so people have an opportunity to come up to you to discuss any problems or ask any questions," he said. "I think it's important that the people of the district have shown a very strong dissatisfaction with the representation they have received this past four years."

Holschuh, 65, is a retired doctor who spent 30 years working in emergency rooms, including a lengthy stint at Hilo Medical Center. He currently chairs the council's Human Services and Economic Development Committee.

Holschuh said he wants to spend the next two years working on a "million things," including helping solve the county's trash-disposal issue, developing affordable housing on county land, pursuing a Waimea bypass, and building a riding area for dirt bikes and all-terrain vehicles.

While both Democrats, each has very different ideas on how best to represent Hamakua (and part Hilo) on the council. To learn more, each was asked to answer the following questions:

What's the best way of processing East Hawaii's garbage once the Hilo landfill becomes full in a couple of years, and how would the county pay for this?

"I'm not against waste-to-energy incineration," Holschuh said, adding that his position is conditional on having "incredibly tight controls" on plant emissions and water contamination.

But opening an incinerator will take years, so the county needs a more-immediate solution, he said.

"I don't know what choice we have," he said.

That solution is bailing the garbage and shipping it to a place like a Washington landfill run by a company seeking East Hawaii's garbage, Holschuh said.

"I think this is a hell of a viable solution," he said. "I'll be happy to champion this. Somebody needs to bring this (shipping idea) up as soon as possible."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently approved the process from Hawaii, provided the garbage contains very little vegetation, he said.

"Recycling is a major-big deal, and we ought to do it," Holschuh said in support of developing composting facilities to process tree trimmings, grass clippings and other "green waste."

"Tipping fees" commercial haulers and businesses now pay to dump their garbage could pay for the shipping, he said.

Yagong said he's very disappointed that incineration is the only disposal technology the county is now considering.

"We should continue and improve our recycling efforts, and bury the remaining trash in (the) quarry site which sits next to the existing landfill," he said. "Lining this quarry to use as a landfill would buy us 20 years to complete our due diligence to select a technology."

"Fiscal discipline" is needed to pay for that, he said

"I will introduce legislation that will mandate setting aside \$20 million to pay for this eventual solution to our garbage crisis."

Both candidates oppose shipping East Hawaii's garbage to the county's Puuanahulu landfill located near Waikoloa.

Why is there a rift between East and West Hawaii, and what can be done to bridge that gap?

"There is definitely a rift between East and West Hawaii," said Yagong, who lives in Honokaa and works in Waikoloa. "The rift exists because there is an imbalance of tax revenues collected from West Hawaii versus East Hawaii, and yet the spending of tax dollars over the years has been dominated by East Hawaii."

Traffic congestion and frequent development have lowered the quality of life for West Hawaii residents, while "insensitive remarks by East Hawaii councilors" have created a "high level of animosity," he said.

The solution, Yagong said, involves greater sensitivity to West Hawaii residents, uniting that region's elected officials, and gaining the support of East Hawaii lawmakers.

Holschuh said the rift results from rapid growth that turned places like Kailua-Kona from a sleepy town into one with "tremendous" infrastructure shortages, while East Hawaii has benefited from generous plantations that built gymnasiums, provided health care and developed housing.

"I'm not trying to downplay ... the concerns of the West Hawaii people," he said. "I think they're so angry because they expect that it should be like where they came from."

Holschuh said what's needed is local government working with developers to provide infrastructure.

"The solution, in my opinion, is not an exact moratorium," he said.

Hawaii County plans to spend \$20-plus million renovating its main office building in Hilo. Should the building be rebuilt, renovated, or is there a better way to house county officials?

Holschuh said he supports renovation due to the building's historical nature.

"We obviously have to spend the \$20-plus million to get it right. I don't agree with tearing it down. I think we ought to keep it, frankly," he said. "I do love to be in the county building."

Holschuh said if there's not enough space, then the county should consider constructing a new building next to the existing one.

Yagong, who worked in the building for six years, said that money could be better spent on other needs, such as solving the garbage-disposal problem.

"We have so many other important needs to address that focusing on building office space is absurd," he said. "In the past 10 years, I haven't heard one person tell me that government needs to focus on building more office space. We need to stop the spending madness and prioritize our spending."

As for renovation, Yagong said the county should determine if more space is needed before spending more than \$20 million.

He questioned the wisdom of buying the former JC Penney building that now houses several county departments, yet is about one-fourth vacant.

"We didn't accomplish much by doing that," said Yagong, who opposed the purchase when he was on the council.

Since the County Council reorganized in early 2005, members have increased their staff and provided pay raises at a combined cost of nearly \$1 million a year and approved spending \$240,000 annually to lease private offices for those workers while the county building is being renovated. Did lawmakers spend too much on their own staffs and offices?

Noting that private employers have had to pay higher wages, Yagong said many of the affected county workers were at the low end of the pay scale and so deserved a raise.

"However, I do have questions regarding the justification to increase staffing," he said.

Calling it prudent to relocate while the county building's asbestos is removed, Yagong said the plan evolved into some lawmakers wanting their own office apart from the mayor's.

"This struck me as being bizarre, and I would consider the proposal a waste of taxpayers' money," he said.

Holschuh said both the larger staff and raises were justified since the council serves a growing population.

"I think it's been a very good thing for the current council chairman and the current council administration," he said. "For me personally, it's been a tremendous help. I think it's great, actually."

Holschuh said having two aides, one of whom frequently meets with constituents to address their concerns, provides better service to taxpayers.

Do you favor a moratorium on new development?

"I don't like the idea of a moratorium," Holschuh said.

A better approach, he added, is establishing cooperative relationships so "developers will help us to create infrastructure."

Yagong said what's needed is concurrency that would require developers to build needed roads and other infrastructure before anyone can live in their projects.

"It must be a condition of approval of any rezoning or development plan approval," he said. "More importantly, it should be enforced vehemently by the County of Hawaii."

Do you support the planned construction of a lumber veneer mill and power plant at the site of the former Ookala sugar mill? Why or why not?

Yagong said he was for the mill until he learned much later that it was to be located in a residential area.

"It's important that we don't force this on the people of Ookala because the question is what community is next?" he said. "The people really feel like it's being rammed down their throats."

Noting he's for value-added products including veneer, Yagong said the mill should be located where it "won't affect the quality of life" of nearby residents.

"I've supported it up to now. That's true," Holschuh said, adding his continued endorsement of the mill is contingent on the operating company addressing all community concerns and doing so in writing.

That has happened, Holschuh said, providing a letter Don Bryan, president of Tradewinds Forest Products, wrote to him Aug. 23.

"It addresses every single bit of mitigating answers," he said of the four-page letter.

The mill site has industrial zoning, the project would provide needed jobs, and the operator can overcome noise, water runoff and coqui frog concerns, Holschuh said.

"People have told me they want it here," he said.

What can be done to make county roads safer?

Teaching drivers, including older ones, good driving techniques, increased DUI roadblocks and other enforcement, and more use of unmanned speed indicators are the solutions, Holschuh said.

"This is not a road problem as much as it is a driver problem, in my opinion," he said. "The truth is the drivers are very irresponsible. This has got to start with education."

Yagong said the most dangerous roads are state highways, which is why the county and state should work together to identify areas for passing lanes that would allow slower-moving commercial trucks to pull over.

"The bypass road in Waimea is the big-picture solution, however, we need to make our roads safe right now," he said. "Allowing for more passing lanes would decrease the number of unnecessary chances motorists take while overtaking on our roadways."

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