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WJC County Election Forum District 3

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Candidates:

- **Celeste Racette**
- **Stephanie Wise**
- **Host:** Tom Shine, KMUW

The event began with a welcome from [Kathy Lefler](#), who explained the purpose of the [Wichita Journalism Collaborative \(WJC\)](#). She noted that the evening would cover topics related to housing, expressing her anticipation to learn more from the candidates.

Audience members were invited to ask questions by coming to the microphone after the WJC asked their questions. The event was supported by Friends University, offering their beautiful auditorium, and the [League of Women Voters](#), who managed time. Audience members were asked to hold their applause until the end of the discussion.

Opening Statements:

- **Celeste Racette:**
Racette introduced herself as a candidate dedicated to providing full-time leadership. She described herself as a taxpayer advocate and emphasized her involvement with [Saving Century II](#). With her professional experience in finance, Racette feels uniquely prepared for the position, promising to dedicate 100% of her time to the role.
- **Stephanie Wise:**
Wise shared that she has been a lifelong resident of Sedgwick County and is a product of the Goddard School District. As a small business owner with 13 years of

experience in real estate and lease negotiations, she emphasized that she frequently hears about the fear and frustration surrounding rising property taxes. She promises to represent Sedgwick County and the needs of the people.

Question 1:

What is the county's responsibility to ensure affordable housing in District 3?

- **Stephanie Wise:**

Wise explained that different communities have different needs and require further definitions of what "affordable housing" means for each area. What is needed for Cheney is different from what is needed for Goddard. Starting out with understanding these needs would be the first step in ensuring affordable housing.

- **Celeste Racette:**

Racette acknowledged that housing affordability is a significant problem. She explained that saving for down payments is difficult for many people. She referenced the [Housing First program](#), which focuses on helping the chronically homeless, noting that while this is mainly a city initiative, the county must collaborate with state and federal governments to provide support.

Question 2:

Do you agree with the county's decision to eliminate long-term camping at Lake Afton?

- **Celeste Racette:**

Racette acknowledged the complexity of the situation. She understood why the county put a limit on long-term camping, as some people were staying indefinitely. However, she believes there must be other solutions that balance the needs of all park users.

- **Stephanie Wise:**

Wise pointed out that there were about 20-30 long-term campers at Lake Afton, which became a problem due to the lack of regulations. The park was never intended as a housing solution, and she suggested starting conversations with landlords to accept housing vouchers for displaced individuals.

Question 3:

What is your view on the Housing First model for addressing homelessness?

- **Stephanie Wise:**

Wise expressed strong support for the Housing First model, emphasizing its positive impact on the community. She highlighted the importance of maintaining the 64 slots currently available in the program.

- **Celeste Racette:**

Racette also supported the Housing First program but warned that state legislators are pushing back against it. She stressed the importance of cooperation with the state to ensure the program continues. Racette emphasized finding funding sources before committing to additional spending on the program.

Question 4:

How would you address the issue of flooding in areas like District 3, where many residents live on floodplains?

- **Celeste Racette:**

Racette discussed the challenges of shifting floodplain boundaries and the high cost of flood insurance, which particularly affects working families. She also mentioned the [dropping water levels at Cheney Reservoir](#), which could impact the region's water supply.

- **Stephanie Wise:**

Wise highlighted the new [FEMA flood maps](#) that would affect cities like Bentley. She advocated for collaboration with affected cities to build up these areas and ensure they are better prepared for potential flooding.

Question 5:

Are property taxes fair, given that 3 out of 5 properties in the county have seen increases this year?

- **Stephanie Wise:**

Wise emphasized the need to address property tax issues at the state level by building strong relationships with state officials.

- **Celeste Racette:**

Racette disagreed, stating that property taxes are influenced more by the local housing market than by the state. She expressed concern about tax abatements given to wealthy investors and referenced the [Riverside TIF \(Tax Increment Financing\) district](#) as an example.

Question 6:

How would you help residents stay in their homes as long as possible?

- **Celeste Racette:**
Racette highlighted that rising property taxes are forcing some people out of their homes. She suggested reducing the mill levy as a potential solution.
- **Stephanie Wise:**
Wise pointed to the need for broader tax reform to create a more balanced tax base, which could help alleviate the burden on homeowners.

Audience Questions:

Is affordable housing a government or private sector responsibility?

- **Stephanie Wise:**
Wise explained that both the government and the private sector have roles in addressing housing needs.
- **Celeste Racette:**
Racette suggested that the government has valuable programs that should be leveraged to address housing issues. She questioned why [352 city-owned homes](#) have not been put on the market.

What are your specific plans to improve affordable housing?

- **Celeste Racette:**
Racette reiterated the importance of getting city-owned homes, such as those in Summitlawn, onto the market.
- **Stephanie Wise:**
Wise clarified that affordable housing falls primarily under the city's responsibility but emphasized the need for positive collaboration between city and county

governments.

How do you plan to address pre-homelessness and help those to avoid becoming homeless?

· **Stephanie Wise:** Wise spoke of the many programs available currently, including COMCARE and the upcoming Multi-Agency Center (MAC). She focused on the many programs that are currently in place.

· **Celeste Racette:** Racette also spoke of programs currently in place. She also mentioned the mental health hospital that is currently planned for South Wichita and how this support can help those who may be in danger of homelessness.

Closing Statements:

- **Stephanie Wise:**

Wise emphasized her background as a small business owner and reiterated that she is running for Sedgwick County, not for a city position.

- **Celeste Racette:**

Racette shared her pride in being a fourth-generation Kansan, emphasizing that she has no ties to developers and will work full-time in the position. With her accounting degree and MBA, she promised to ensure taxpayer money is spent fairly and efficiently.

Summary

· Candidates for Sedgwick County Commissioner District 3, Stephanie Wise and Celeste Racette were allowed to ask several questions regarding housing in the County and how they would address issues surrounding housing.

· Racette emphasized her financial expertise and dedication to full-time leadership, advocating for collaboration with state and federal programs, while Wise highlighted her real estate experience and support for property tax reform and broader affordable

housing strategies.

- Both candidates expressed support for the Housing First program and agreed that balancing public and private sector roles is crucial in addressing housing issues.

Follow up Questions

- When so many of the housing issues that were discussed is handled by the City of Wichita, how will the elected candidate work with the city to address housing concerns?
- What would Racette and Wise do to create the property tax reform they both speak of? What would this look like?

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