Democratic candidates talk issues

Campaigns focus on Seminole's rural boundary

By Martin E. Comas
ORLANDO SENTINEL


Lowndes


Duncan

Protecting Seminole County's rural boundary is a key issue in the political campaigns of John Lowndes and H. Alexander Duncan, the two candidates vying for the Democratic nomination in the race for the Florida Senate's District 10 seat.

The winner in the Aug. 18 primary will face incumbent Jason Brodeur — a Republican seeking his second term — in the general election on Nov. 3.

In 2004, Seminole voters approved by a large margin a measure establishing the county's rural boundary, which covers roughly the eastern third of Seminole, east of the Econlockhatchee River, in an effort to preserve the area's rural character and control urban sprawl. Development is limited to one home per five acres or one home per 10 acres.

The area, however, came under attack at this year's Legislative session, when Brodeur backed an amendment to a bill filed by a South Florida Republican that would effectively tear down those development restrictions and undercut local governments' control of rural areas. The amendment would have compensated landowners with tax dollars if their efforts to build at a greater density in the protected area were turned down.

The amendment was not approved by the state Senate, but it's likely to come back next year — which is one of the reasons Lowndes and Duncan both decided to run for the state Senate seat.

"The people of Seminole County have been very clear: Everything east of the rural boundary is to remain rural and low density," said Lowndes, 62, who has served as Maitland's mayor since 2021. "It's not just a smart growth issue, but it's an environmental issue . ... The rural boundary is a gem that should be preserved. It's one of the things that makes Florida such a unique place."

Lowndes is an attorney for the non-profit Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium in Anchorage, Alaska. He also has served on Maitland's city council.

Duncan, 46, was born and raised in Geneva, a small rural community tucked between the Black Hammock Wilderness Area and Lake Harney. He currently works as a consultant.

"I am definitely committed and dedicated toward protecting the

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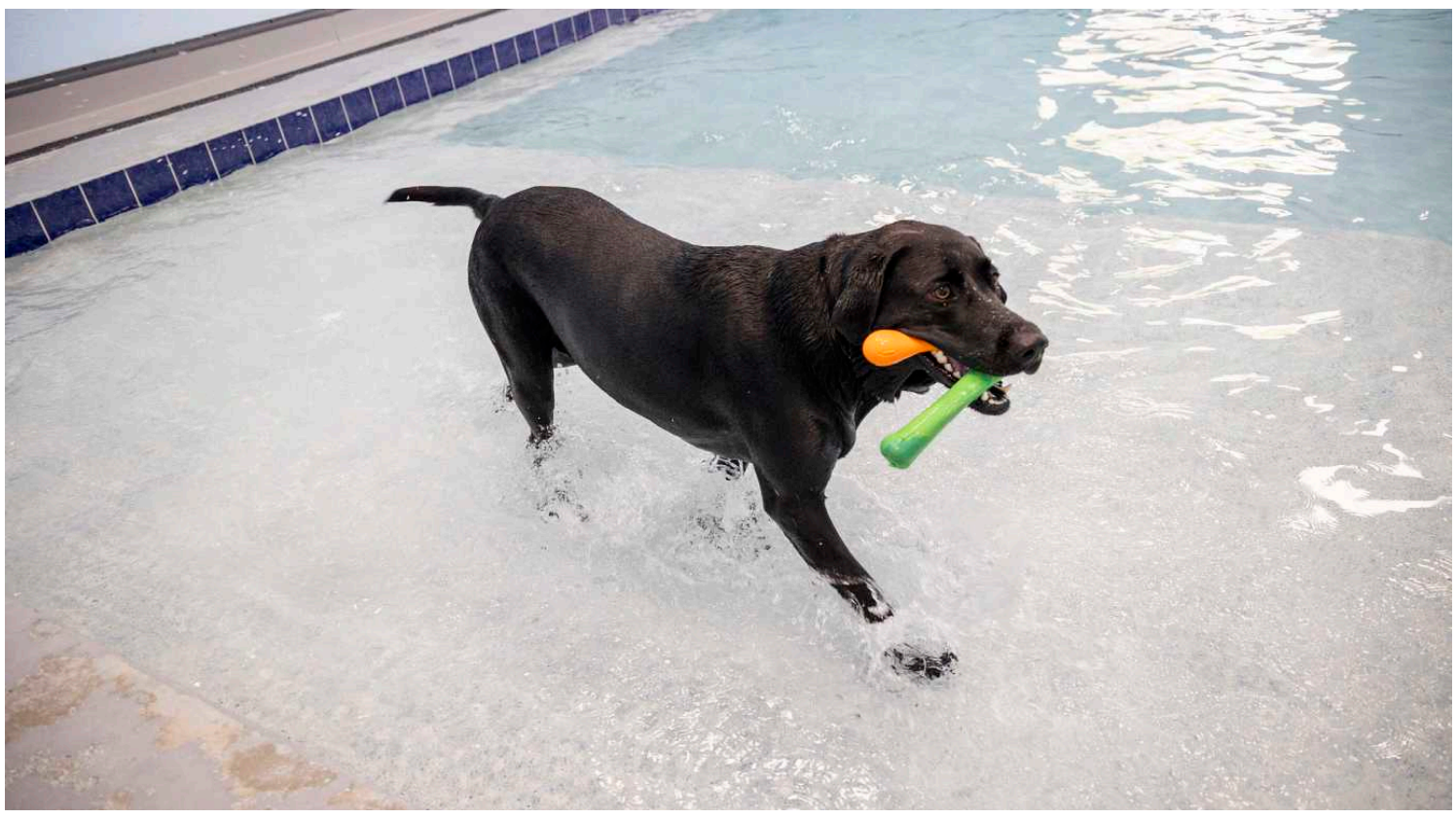
Faith, a 1 ½-year-old black lab, swims for toys at DogBeach Orlando in Casselberry. **PATRICK CONNOLLY/ORLANDO SENTINEL**

'Summer camp' for pups

DogBeach Orlando offers daycare, boarding near Winter Park

By Patrick Connolly
ORLANDO SENTINEL

A new luxury pet resort in Central Florida aims to help pups beat the heat in the dog days of summer with an indoor pool, air-conditioned play areas and more under one "woof."

DogBeach Orlando, which opened earlier this summer in Casselberry, offers a fully indoor environment for boarding, daycare, grooming and veterinary services. The 30,000-square-foot space invites humans and visitors in with its beach-themed decor and friendly staff members.

"We try to build really inviting, whimsical, safe places where dogs can just have a blast. We want it to be summer camp," said Michael Freedman, the pet resort's co-owner. "When that dog comes in here, if that tail is going 90 miles per hour and they're doing zoomies, we know we're doing our job. That's the affirmation we get for doing a good job."

Stepping into the dog areas past the front desk, visitors are greeted by punny names such as the "Waldog Astoria Residence," which features spa-like suites with relaxing music and aromatherapy for anxious dogs, and the "Bark Avenue" suites. The top-tier VIP "Rex Carlton" suites each feature a personal TV, webcams for pet parents, luxury bedding and Yeti dog bowls.

Four indoor play areas are separated for dogs of varying sizes, and one is for pups that prefer one-on-one play with the staff. Each space has puppy pads that are cleaned using a high-tech vacuum system for waste removal.

Both boarding and daycare include off-leash play, socialization and pool time, which proves to be a favorite among many four-legged guests.

"We don't want our guests in their rooms. We want our guests doing activities the entire time. It's also why we're all inclusive," Freedman said. "The hardest part of the pool is getting them out of it."

For first-time clients, DogBeach Orlando offers a free pet evaluation including an owner interview to make sure that each pup is a good fit for the space. The first daycare visit is also free as the staff slowly introduces the dog to other residents.

A current promotion allows new clients to use the code "DOGSRULE" to get unlimited daycare visits for 30 days for $99. Pet parents interested in boarding can take advantage of a deal to book two nights and get a third night free for stays now through the end of the year.

DogBeach Orlando took over the space formerly used as a Big Lots near the intersection of State Route 436 and Howell Branch Road. DogBeach has one other location in Ponte Verda Beach, about 15 minutes south of Jacksonville Beach.

The opening of DogBeach Orlando created approximately 40 new Central Florida jobs, with additional growth expected as the company evaluates "expansion opportunities throughout the region."

The standard price for daycare is $40 per day, while overnight boarding stays range from $65-$135 per night with discounts available for a second dog and longer stays. For more information, visit dogbeachorlando.com.

Find me @PConnPie on Instagram or send me an email: pconnolly@orlandosentinel.com. Stay up to date with our latest travel, arts and events coverage by subscribing to our newsletters at orlandosentinel.com/newsletters.

Leaders finally approve tax rate

City's new mayor says difficult decisions lie ahead of September

By Brian Bell
ORLANDO SENTINEL

The leaders of Apopka were finally able to adopt a tentative millage rate hike Thursday, but only after cutting it down enough that they could get around sustained opposition from one commissioner — and the new mayor says that means more budget-cutting.

Just one day before the state deadline, city commissioners voted 4-1 to increase the preliminary property tax rate for the next fiscal year by just under .24 mills.

Commissioners had wanted to set a preliminary increase of .75 mills, with the goal of reducing it to no more than .50 mills, but were stymied by Anderson. Under the state's Truth in Millage Act, governments can lower a preliminarily approved rate but face hurdles in raising it.

The new rate of 4.6761 mills, with each mill equaling $1 of tax for every $1,000 of a property's assessed value, will generate about $2.1 million, or 18.9%, in new revenue.

A property owner in the city would pay about $468 for every $100,000 of assessed value — about $25 more than the current rate. That could mean property tax bills going up about $100 for a house assessed at $400,000.

An additional $4.68 million in revenue is expected from a 12.8% increase in property values. The revenue supports the city's General Fund and its proposed spending plan of almost $169 million.

A .75-mill increase would have boosted tax revenue by about $6.6 million, while a .50-mill increase would have generated an additional $4.4 million.

Orange County and several of its cities, including Orlando, Winter Garden and Winter Park, have opted not to increase millage rates, though Ocoee approved a .3422-mill increase.

Apopka Mayor Nick Nesta said after the meeting that commissioners have difficult decisions to make about additional cuts before the final rate and budget are adopted in September.

"We'll have to take a deep dive into every single department," said Nesta, who took office April 28 after serving as a commissioner since 2022. "We're going to continue to make sure that our budget is as refined as possible.

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Apopka City Commissioner Nadia Anderson has opposed efforts by Mayor Nick Nesta to get the City Commission to approve an increased preliminary property tax rate for the upcoming fiscal year starting Oct. 1. **PROVIDED PHOTOS**

Kissimmee pawn shop nearly burns down in blaze

By Silas Morgan
ORLANDO SENTINEL

Kissimmee firefighters spent several hours Friday morning fighting an aggressive blaze that nearly burned down a pawn shop, which a fire official called a "total loss."

Firefighters responded around 6 a.m. to the Simple Pawn & Jewelry store on Vine Street after the building's fire alarm went off. They initially tried to combat the fire from inside the shop but were ordered to back out of the building due to the flames.

The structure's roof collapsed around 15 minutes later, officials said. The blaze was finally extinguished around 11 a.m. with the aid of about 40 firefighters.

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BARRETT WALSH/ORLANDO SENTINEL

THE NEW SQUAD 2

Firefighter Wesley Escue shows his kids, Ryker, left, and Wyatt, the tools inside the new Squad 2 during the Seminole County Fire Department ceremony celebrating the arrival of the all-hazards response unit at Fire Station 35 in Sanford on Friday. The $1.7 million unit was placed into service July 1 and is designed for emergencies beyond traditional fires and EMS response.