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New commissioners outline priorities

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All three Gainesville city commissioners sworn into office Thursday echoed a commitment to, and love of, the city of Gainesville as they outlined the priorities they hold for their three-year terms in office.

Re-elected Commissioner Jack Donovan begins his fourth year of service to the city, while Commissioners Thomas Hawkins and Lauren Poe are first-time elected officials.

The three winners of the city election earlier this year touched on politics, policy and community while speaking to a crowd at the Thelma Boltin Center on Thursday.

Donovan, 63, was elected mayor-commissioner pro-tem, meaning that if Mayor Pegeen Hanrahan is unable to attend a meeting, Donovan will be acting mayor.

Donovan, a Democrat, took a shot at state officials in Tallahassee and their recent policy moves, which he said "redirect the wealth of our community upward."

"We see the very wealthy and their smiling co-conspirators in the governor's office ripping off the state of Florida," Donovan said.

The retired minister said he included that issue in his speech Thursday because the local community is not behind the cuts — like Amendment 1 — that will hurt the people of Gainesville.

The commissioners will take an early look at the 2009 budget, facing a potential \$3.5 million deficit at a retreat on June 2.



Aaron Daye/The Gainesville Sun
Commissioner Thomas Hawkins, left, takes the oath of office as Judge Walter Green, right, swears Hawkins in as city commissioner at the Thelma Boltin Center on Thursday.

Donovan also addressed the need to protect for future generations the "Eden" of Gainesville — which he said has been enjoyed by humans for 10,000 years.

Hawkins, who is an attorney specializing in land-use law, also touched on the need for preservation, "with good infrastructure, smart growth, responsible growth."

"We need a way that shows that our government understands the importance of protecting our environment, but at the same time continuing to grow," said Hawkins, 28.

"I really do want to make the growth-management issue the hallmark of my tenure on the commission," Hawkins said in an interview before his speech.

He said those goals include pedestrian mobility, mixed-use development and a more urban city.

Hawkins said he is eager to get involved in the process of the city redrafting its comprehensive plan in coming years.

Poe, a 36-year-old Santa Fe Community College professor, focused his speech on conservation as well — energy conservation.

Poe addressed the global climate change, saying it's "time to prepare for the undeniable changes that face us."

He praised the current commission's recent selection of a "carbon-neutral biomass plant," and expressed hope that the city would be on the "leading edge of a new energy model."

That model, he said, would rely heavily on solar power here in Florida. "It's inconceivable that we do not make better use of solar power," he said.

Poe pitched ideas for public and private partnerships toward achieving renewable energy and said the "new green is not environment, it's economic."

Both new commissioners underwent an intensive orientation process, City Manager Russ Blackburn said, adding that he is excited to work with the new commission.

However, people have expressed concern that the commission is all Democrats, now that former Commissioner Ed Braddy, a Republican, is being replaced by Democrat Poe.

Blackburn said he thought the commission would be balanced.

"They're going to all think a little bit differently and they'll provide a balance," he said.

Former Commissioner Rick Bryant, a Democrat and self-proclaimed fiscal conservative, is being replaced by Hawkins on the commission.

"I'm hoping that one of the new commissioners will step up in the role and realize that not everyone in Gainesville has a degree from the university," Bryant said.

City commissioners are paid \$29,288 a year and Blackburn estimates the officials will work about 40 hours a week on city issues.

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