

Candidates drop the gloves

Bennett, Wright, Marceau put heat on Fedeli

by Dave Dale

The Nugget

North Bay mayoral candidates put their campaigns into high gear Wednesday at the North Bay and District Chamber of Commerce election forum. And sparks were flying with 11 days to go before the Nov. 10 election, with Lynne Bennett, Tim Wright and Jeff Marceau taking swipes at apparent frontrunner Vic Fedeli. An MCTV news poll released this week puts first-time candidate Fedeli far ahead of Bennett, an 18-year council veteran and recent deputy-mayor - leaving newcomers Wright and Marceau fighting for third place.

Wright said Fedeli is taking too much credit for local aerospace industry jobs, getting boos from a crowd filled with placard-waving Fedeli supporters. "I've talked to a number of people who have said those jobs would have come anyway," he said. Wright said the provincial and federal governments put up the money for marketing and repairs to the hangars left by the Department of National Defence.

Fedeli had opened his address with breaking news that Bombardier Inc. informed him staff were back at work Wednesday after closing up shop in increments this summer. Marceau jumped in, asking if it was true Voyageur Airways had a shop here prior to the Air Base Property Corporation forming with Fedeli appointed chairman. "The short answer is they were moving to the Soo when I met them," Fedeli said. Wright referred to Fedeli's appointment as "politically motivated."

Bennett promised to reopen the city's long-term plan, untouched in 12 years with open, public consultation with "everyone" to make sure "ideas are not limited to a little yellow book." Fedeli published what he calls a 2020 Vision plan, developed during the past year with more than 100 representatives of all sectors of the city - its primary colour the same yellow as his signs and the tie he wears. Bennet said she is the only one "qualified" to run for mayor because she has learned the ropes as a councillor. Marceau started off the night with a jab at The Nugget, calling it The North Bay Fedeli Times. And the trampoline coach said he is convinced it's an obvious requirement to support the future North Bay Regional Health Centre, Fedeli gave the hospital's fundraising foundation a donation in the lead up to his campaign kickoff, and it was promoted in an advertisement. Marceau said it's been a "rude awakening" and called it part of the "I'll scratch-your-back syndrome." In the same vein later in the evening, Wright said "leadership is not about running to the paper...and to say, 'Oh, I'm great.' "It's not a public relations campaign. It's about putting the people first, not yourself," he said.

Series of questions

A series of questions written by the chamber addressed waterfront development, tourism, property taxes and other opportunities for economic growth. Fedeli said he isn't willing to give up hope council could bring in a zero-increase budget in 2004. The majority of the 24 candidates

for council said Tuesday at the first chamber forum a tax increase of some type is inevitable. Bennett said she would support a cost-of-living increase next year, but then fight for a better deal from the provincial and federal governments, apparently willing to better fund infrastructure improvements. Wright said the "problem" isn't tax increases, it is getting more outside private investment in the city. He said his contacts in international finance and manufacturing circles would yield manufacturing investment. Wright also said staff have said council will find a "surprise" challenge of funding the provincial pension plan for municipal employees after a "holiday." Marceau said "taxes are too high to begin with," but said his truck won't last the nine years it will take for a long-term capital improvement policy to fix the crumbling roads. Didn't have the numbers

One woman asked Bennet, who was budget chief for the past 16 months and for the term prior to 2000, about the current level of debt and commitments for North Bay. Bennett said she didn't have the numbers in front of her, but said debt had gone down by about \$5 million.

Wright said he knew that the city's \$92-million budget is "confusing" partly because the debt owed by North Bay Hydro Ltd. is worked into it. Marceau said he had "no idea" about the size of the debt, but said he felt the city could work its way out of it. Fedeli said the debt is \$32 million, with commitments of \$15 million to the future regional health centre, \$10 million to the future water filtration plant, \$10 million for infrastructure related to the hospital area and several million more. Fedeli said the \$3-million "bailout" loan guarantee to the North Bay-Mattawa Conservation Authority should also be added to the list. He said discussions with city staff reveal debt and commitments are "at least" \$70 million, with some saying \$90 million. "I can never find two people who can give me the same number...that's a big part of the problem," Fedeli said.