

Activist gets the business from real estate group

Susan Eagle's appearance before a pro-business audience presents a challenge.

By Chip Martin
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A London group demanding no new property tax increases had mixed success Thursday in extracting commitments to their goal from candidates for board of control.

Eight of the 11 candidates for the four seats of city controller were grilled on tax and money questions by HALT (Hold All London Taxes) in front of about 120 ratepayers.

For some candidates, such as social activist Susan Eagle, the appearance in the meeting room of the London and St. Thomas Real Estate Board presented a difficult challenge.

For others — such as incumbent councillors Vaughan Minor and Dawn Erskine and their pro-business stance — it was an easier time.

Eagle, a United Church minister and community outreach worker, was booed when she said she is philosophically opposed to forcing welfare recipients to work for their cheques.

"We are not a community where we have forced labor of people," she said.

At another point, tax fighter Jim Montag accused Eagle of keeping her personal affairs secret by not revealing where she lives.

When Eagle said she had to remove her address from the phone book because of threats from a landlord, she was greeted with disbelieving laughter.

She was no happier when realtor Jim Rowcliffe said it is

time the city began imposing property taxes on churches "because they haven't been carrying their freight" because of their tax-exempt status.

Meanwhile, Minor stressed his commitment to fiscal restraint, saying he was one of council's first zero-per-centers. "My goal for the next council is no tax growth."

His only tough question came when he was asked how his involvement with the convention centre (he sits on its board) has led to a tripling of operating deficits to \$1.5 million a year.

Minor conceded mistakes have been made and pledged to eliminate the subsidy in the next decade.

Erskine was asked how she moved from being an environmental activist to someone who now stresses economic development.

"I've always been a champion of the environment and I will continue to do so," she said. "But I've learned economic growth is very important. Without economic growth we can't afford to protect our environment."

SAVINGS: Other candidates, such as incumbent Grant Hopcroft, were less willing to pledge themselves to freezing taxes. He said cutting costs and restructuring are ways to achieve savings, but the city has to change the way it does business to make real savings.

He wouldn't promise any cuts in development charges for the largely business and real estate audience. "Some increases in the development charges is needed at this time."

Another candidate, Cheryl Miller, also was reluctant to commit to no tax increases, arguing such an answer is "simply" given all the vagaries of funding from higher levels of government.