

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

IT'S YOUR TOWN. READ ALL ABOUT IT.

Note-Reading, Clemente Deal Spark Debate

BY Staff | AUG 12, 2011 7:34 AM

[\(11\) Comments](#) | [Post a Comment](#) | [E-mail the Author](#)

Posted to: [Politics](#), [Campaign 2011](#)



THOMAS MACMILLAN PHOTO

DeStefano responded sharply to criticisms from his challengers.



A larger and oranger than life Robert Lee made an appearance.



School reform sparked some of the sharpest exchanges as the five candidates for mayor held their first debate Thursday night—and hundreds tuned in in person and at home to join the conversation on issues from privatization to candidate note-reading..

The 90-minute debate took place at Metropolitan Business Academy. It featured incumbent Mayor John DeStefano and his four Democratic challengers: Jeffrey Kerekes, Tony Dawson, Clifton Graves, and Robert Lee.

The event was sponsored by the Independent and La Voz Hispana. Journalists from these



Metropolitan's multi-story cafeteria held a capacity crowd.

two news outlets put questions to the candidates, along with reporters from the New Haven Register, WNPR, and [One World](#). About 200 people filled the high school's cafeteria for the event, which was peppered with boos and applause from candidates' fans.

Meanwhile, another panel of reporters analyzed the action as it unfolds in a live-blog. Readers followed along on a live video feed and added their comments to the conversation in the live-blog box below.



The Register's Abbe Smith asked a question of the candidates. Shani is pictured at far right.

N'Zinga Shani (at right in photo) of One World public access TV asked about the school district's decision to [hire the first for-profit company, Renaissance School Services LLC, to take over a public school, Roberto Clemente Leadership Academy.](#)



Dawson made his closing statement.

Dawson called the takeover "a terrible idea." People were "shut out" of the process, he said. And he suggested that the company getting the contract will contribute to mayor's campaign.



district is trying new solutions, he said.



Graves made his closing statement.

Graves criticized the process by which Renaissance was hired. The process had a "lack of transparency," he said. He said the company had a "lack of a track record." He suggested the city transfer high-paid current administrators there rather than spend new money.

While Kerekes disagreed with DeStefano throughout the night, he agreed with the mayor on this and the institution of [midnight parking meters](#). He commended DeStefano for the experiment at Clemente, while giving a backhand slap by saying the kids have been failed." He agreed with DeStefano that "we should try every model" of school reform.

Robert Lee called the Clemente takeover a "catastrophe."

La Voz reporter Stephanie Paulino asked about two things that happened at Wilbur Cross High School this year: First, students' political action club was disbanded after they led a march to City Hall demanding more funding for text books and less for administrators. (The faculty advisor stepped down and wouldn't comment on his resignation; no other teacher agreed to do the job.) Second, the school principal, Peggy Moore, nullified student election results after an outspoken student won.

Is that right? asked Paulino. What's the mayor's role in these cases?

DeStefano completely defended what happened. The principal and schools Superintendent Reggie Mayo did "the right thing to reach out [to the students] and encourage their participation."

Dawson stood behind the students. "The students were just like I was 35 years ago when I marched on [Mayor] Bart Guida" when Lee High School lacked air conditioning, he said.

Graves alleged "poor judgment" and a "poor decision" on part of administrators. "We need to encourage [students], not discourage them."

Lee also stood behind the students: "We need to see more kids standing up for what they believe."

Kerekes argued that the two incidents reflect the lack of democracy in New Haven and the lack of free ability to dissent from those in power or criticize them.

"Democracy is being squashed across the city," Kerekes charged.



A Graves supporter filmed the debate with her cell phone.

The reviews came in instantaneously on the live blog:

7:39

Laurel Leff:

Kerekes reading from notes. It's very apparent that's what he's doing.

7:43

ASL:

The Mayor wants us to be comfortable bringing in outsiders to help us reform our schools ... many parents in this town want the Mayor to be comfortable bringing in outsiders (to replace some of the insiders!) to help us reform our schools!

7:48

Comment From Gary Holder-Winfield

KKerekes would do better to read things he could say without reading anyway

7:50

Comment From Kerekes fan

I saw Kerekes write the cards himself, actually. It's nice that he's organized and thought about what he wanted to say beforehand, don't you think?

7:50

John Dankosky:

Kerekes reading again. To the Fan...he is organized, and gets his points in and on time. I think he's gotta show he can think on his feet.

7:53

robn:

Kerekes is probably using cards because he's the only rookie in the room. 25? years junior to the rest. The biggest question I have is why the heck does he want the office? Some kind of masochist or just extremely do-goody?

7:53

Comment From progressiveNH

Kerekes is not going to be able to govern off of notecards. I'm imagining him trying to negotiate with the unions that way. Total fail.

7:54

Comment From Aly

I'd rather see someone have notecards and ideas, than no notecards and no ideas...

7:53

Comment From Gary Holder-Winfield

Destefano should pull back on the emotion just a tad

7:54

Laurel Leff:

I think DeStefano is better when's got some passion. So far I don't think he's crossed the line.

7:55

Comment From Gary Holder-Winfield

Yeah he seems unnecessarily angry. Emotion is fine but I think he shows more anger than needed

7:56

John Dankosky:

Halfway thru: Dawson seems very thoughtful, but not like he's running for anything; Mayor is alternately annoyed and fired up; Graves is getting better along the way; Kerekes is going after DeStefano big time (if scripted); Lee hasn't really answered one question asked, but has emotion

8:03

angi carter - nh register:

Mood lightens on question about who has been most successful mayor: Dawson said that person hasn't served because it would be him. DeStefano gives it to former Alderwoman Louisa DeLauro who was honored over the weekend

8:03

Melissa Bailey:

Kerekes: "a successful mayor is someone here who listens," builds coalitions. ... he's not mentioning a mayor either! he's back to attacking DeStefano.

8:06

Laurel Leff:

I wish there would be more emphasis on why DeStefano thinks he should get another term. That may seem self-evident, but that's the real question, isn't it?

8:07

John Dankosky:

Uh oh, Kerekes lost his place in notes. That's the problem with reading, folks.

8:14

Melissa Bailey:

q: new idea. Kerekes: publish the city's check register online to be more transparent.

8:16

robn: Kerekes is proposing real time expenditure access?
Love to see that graphically expressed; with debt service included it might send people into cardiac!

8:30

ASL:
I'm not sure what's more scary—someone who can't admit having made a single mistake in 18 years or someone who doesn't recognize that New Haven is a better place to live now than it was 18 years ago.

8:30

Laurel Leff:
DeStefano had some good answers tonight, but he's too darn prickly.

8:31

John Dankosky:
Laurel: JDS prickly sometimes, sad looking others, fired up, too. We saw the whole range.



A larger and oranger than life Robert Lee made an appearance.

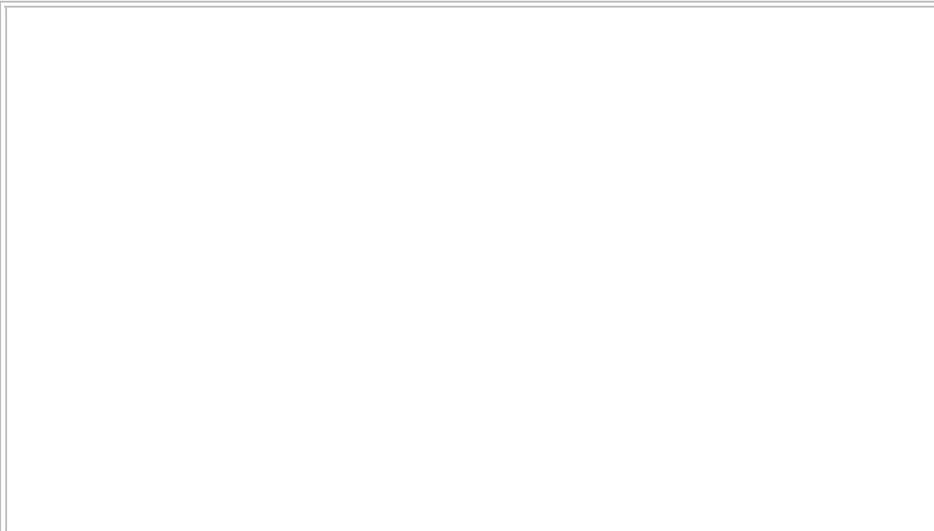
This year's mayoral contest is shaping up to be one of the most hotly contested in years. The challenger candidates are fresh off of a breakneck two-week push to collect the signatures they need to land a spot on the Sept. 13 Democratic primary ballot. All four claim to have collected the requisite 2,092 signatures. The registrar of voters will make the final determination next week.



A Graves supporter filmed the debate with her cell phone.

home.

And check back later for a story on the debate here in the Independent and to watch the debate itself, when the video streams shot by NBC Connecticut and the Register reappear. (It could take a few hours.) NBC Connecticut also reported on the event during its 11 p.m. newscast.



2011 Mayoral Debate

(08/11/2011)

- 6:49 **Monica Barry:** Channel 6 is ready to go with the live stream. Watch it on the New Haven Independent homepage as we live-blog the event.

- 6:50 **Comment From Citizen**
 Thank you NHI for sponsoring this!

- 6:51 **John Dankosky:** Just tweeted my presence here, too @wherewelive. @scuttlebuttt will be so proud.

- 6:54 **John Dankosky:** I'm testing now

- 6:56 **John Dankosky:** Ahh done testing. And the iPad is live.

- 6:57 **Comment From Dan Kennedy**
 Looking forward to watching this and following along at home.

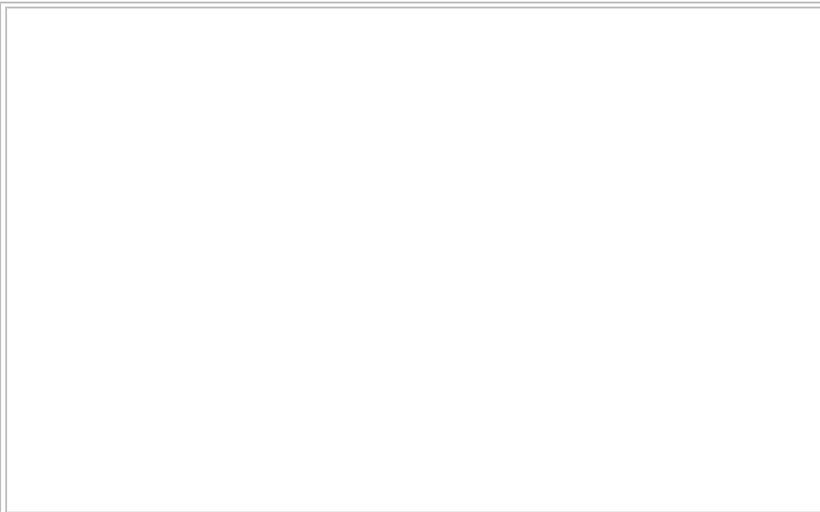
- 7:00 **Laurel Leff:** Hi Dan. Careful what you tell our students about their live blogging professor.

- 7:00 **John Dankosky:** I think I am online now. Just met candidates Clifton Graves and Tony Dawson for the first time. Need to go talk to Rep. Holder-Winfield in a moment.

- 7:01 **angi:** Good evening all. Metro Academy is filling up, lots of energy in the air for the 2011 mayoral debate!




COVER T LIVE



Comments

posted by: visitor on August 11, 2011 8:07pm

aside from the live feed will the video for this be available on NHIC or any of the other live feed sources <|> after <|> the debate is over? this is important for many people!

[Note: We expect to have the video up later today.]

posted by: average joe on August 11, 2011 8:19pm

I love Graves saying he'll hire Kerekes as his budget director.

posted by: Newhallville Mom on August 11, 2011 8:34pm

I'm tire of hearing about the ship thats sailing and about crime. These parents need to be accountable for their children not the Mayor.

Jeffrey is not talking about lowering my taxes, sorry I was thinking about voting for him but i wasn't impress.

posted by: Westville parent on August 11, 2011 8:58pm

To Westville Mom—sorry you are nervous in Edgewood Park. I bring my little ones to the Edgewood Park playground, to Ranger's nature program, RiverKeeper canoe program on the West River at Edgewood, the skate park, the CitySeed farmers market every sunday, The Art Walk in May, and even the "haunted house" halloween weekend. I've never felt anything but proud to live in this neighborhood!!

posted by: robn on August 11, 2011 10:16pm

The Graves-offers-Kerekes-a-job moment was what the film Rocky II might have been if Apollo Creed had not gone on to a rematch with Rocky Balboa, but instead, attempted to hire away his financial advisor.

posted by: cedarhillresident on August 11, 2011 10:27pm

Well Newhallville mom that is your right. Something we are getting to have again because of all of these men! But I have worked with Jeffrey on the budget fight for many years. Taxes are his priority. It is what will bring business back to the city. Keep the working class in there homes. I am one of the struggling women in the city. And that is the reason I am fighting so hard for him. Call him, talk to him. I think he was amazing and people walking out were signing up for him. This is very exciting!
Jeffrey Kerekes was spot on!! I am proud to be a supporter!

posted by: Charlie O'Keefe on August 11, 2011 11:55pm

I found this all very interesting, but completely uninspiring. DeStefano is definitely past it, and really should have had the decency to resign after he failed to make it as Governor. In the private sector it's up or out, and he's been in suspended animation for 5 years now as Mayor, pissing all our money away on whatever fantasy enters his head. He really must go.

As to the contenders I'm not impressed with them. Very much the same problem as DeStefano, huge egos with no real ability.

Kerekes had a few sparks but was like a school kid reading from his little cheat sheets. All very easy to plan in advance, but if things turn out different from expected he's toast. As things always turn out different in New Haven he's burnt toast already.

Graves seems like a decent human being, but just can't communicate what he stands for and what he'll do. I guess as an attorney he gets paid by the word and is used to churning out meaningless drivel for a living. It takes a lot more than that to run a city like New Haven that's challenging Detroit for being the biggest basket case of all time.

Dawson. Well, what a poor performance. "I'll be the greatest mayor of all time" was his refrain and his refrain and his refrain. Yeah, right. We all watch TV with commercials 30 minutes in the hour. Say it and say it and say it and they'll believe it. McDonalds hamburgers are really good for you. We all know that's true. Just ask Bill Clinton, you know, the former President with the most by-pass surgery. I'm sorry Mr Dawson, but you really were the worst performer. I expect you to continue to the bitter end, and help get DeStefano re-elected by splitting the vote.

Now, Mr Lee. You must have been very, very, very nervous. I know you are a decent person who will try to do the right thing. I don't think anyone else does as you were totally incoherent. Unless you can pull it together and clearly get across what you will do you should throw the towel in too.

So, for my two cents, in alphabetical order its either Graves or Kerekes. Both of you need to line up heavyweights who can support you as Mayor. We all know DeStefano has really strong players like Brancatti, Fusco, Whinstanley and Matthews behind him. They all have very large and open wallets.

Me. I'm looking to get out of town. Can't afford the taxes, and can't stand the stupidity.

posted by: Bill Saunders on August 12, 2011 2:49am

Charlie O'K,

I don't quite think it is fair to compare a city like Detroit to New Haven.
(despite our twin appearances on recent polls)

Just as a reality check, check out these photos from Detroit....

This is truly Blight.

<http://blogs.denverpost.com/captured/2011/02/07/captured-the-ruins-of-detroit/2672/>

posted by: Chris Gray on August 12, 2011 5:18am

Since an errant finger just sent a half an hour's work into the toilet trying to use your page, I'll use my own word processing!

From News Channel...excuse me News 8's coverage tonight, let me synthesize Kerekes' opponents' arguments; 'Despite the truth of your attack on our historically incompetent police dept. (from the Chief who asked my brother for an army armored personnel carrier to respond to but fail to solve the Yale Whale bombing, to the botched Serra murder prosecutions, to the botched conviction in the murder of Dawson's predecessor on the Board, to the failure to even name a suspect in the Jovin murder, or to solving the 20 Kerekes mentioned), who are you, a young, uncorrupted, unconnected non-native (as if being born and raised here is a qualification written into the Charter – but who recalls a New Haven mayor who wasn't?) to disrespect your honorable, hard-working elders?'

Your spell checker blocked the "secret word" costing me another hour trying to save and post this!!!

posted by: Chris Gray on August 12, 2011 5:48am

Rats, I'm pretty sure that I lost my best line in the process. So, here it is; I thought we were an immigrant friendly city, now!

posted by: Cookie Monster on August 12, 2011 7:07am

There were too many small and petty questions last night. What I missed from all of the challengers was a true sense of a positive vision for New Haven. It's easy to criticize an incumbent, but it's harder to put forward a real, positive plan for New Haven. The closest I've seen any candidate come to doing that has been Kerekes, but so many of his ideas are more about process and management style than anything that would really transform New Haven. A rental pool for equipment for city departments, posting checks online, not hiring a campaign volunteer as your chief of staff, or firing a bunch of administrators at the Board of Education is not a vision for a new and positive future. Unless you buy Republican ideology, lowering taxes is not a recipe for job creation or growth of the middle class. Kerekes comes off as more of a libertarian than a Democrat.

What I really like about DeStefano is that even after so many terms in office, he continues to put forward new, progressive ideas for improving the city. None of these candidates have impressed me the way DeStefano has with New Haven Promise, creation of the prison re-entry initiative, School Change and one of the most progressive and reform-minded teachers contracts out there, school construction (I disagree with Lee and Kerekes that students should learn in "raggedy" schools. That would never be acceptable in Trumbull where Kerekes grew up, and it should never be acceptable for New Haven students), the Elm City ID card, the redesign of Route 34... I just don't see anything anywhere near as progressive or visionary from any of the other candidates out there.
