

New Haven Democrats square off in race for mayor's seat

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NEW HAVEN — This year's 21 homicides loomed large over a heated mayoral debate Thursday evening that covered topics from education to

Mayor John DeStefano Jr., who is seeking a 10th term, was on the defensive for much of the night as four Democratic challengers hammered his safety and budget woes and accused him of micromanaging city departments.

"I sort of feel like the challenger here," DeStefano said at one point, before adding that city voters are smart and "will figure this out."

Tense exchanges occurred between DeStefano and his frequent critic, Jeffrey Kerekes, a budget watchdog running as a City Hall outsider. Also on the campaign for the mayor's office are local lawyer Clifton Graves Jr. and former Aldermen Anthony Dawson and Robert Lee.

The debate, which was held at Metropolitan Business Academy, was co-sponsored by the New Haven Independent and La Voz Hispana. The debate included local reporters asking questions and a separate panel of journalists live-blogging. The debate was live-streamed by the Register in Connecticut.

On economic development, DeStefano noted that the city had the largest grand list growth in the state this year. Kerekes countered that he meant in jobs created for city residents.

While challengers attacked him on education, DeStefano strongly defended school reform and touted the New Haven Promise college scholarship.

Asked if they would raise taxes and make cuts if faced with a deficit, Kerekes said “not in the first year” and vowed to cut “waste.” Lee said, “I will cut the street to make the budget right.” Dawson promised to end “cronyism.” Graves vowed to cut 10 percent from salaries of people earning more than \$100,000. He reiterated the need to focus on pension and health care reform and warned of challenges next year with property revaluation.

Members of the public who chimed in on the blog roll were not fond of the initial question, which called on candidates to describe how they would handle an anthrax scare in a public library.

Jonathan Hopkins wrote: “What kind of question is that?” Followed by someone with the screen name “ASL” who commented: “A 3 AM phone call?”

Observers read Dawson as “cool” and not thrown by questions. They thought Lee rambled at some points, but spoke passionately. Kerekes came across as prepared with facts and figures, notes and speaking points, who took the most shots at DeStefano.

“Kerekes keeps hitting DeStefano hard,” wrote journalist blogger Laurel Leff.

The audience thought the mayor was on the defensive about homicides among city youths, appointing a police chief from Chicago, budget decisions that he micromanages. Despite deflecting criticism from four others, he also came across as experienced and passionate when defending the school crime.

Candidates offered new ideas for improving finances: Kerekes vowed to publish the city’s check register online; Lee vowed to “go green”; DeStefano vowed to make people who use city resources “pay for them,” and Graves offered a task force on fiscal responsibility, then got laughter and applause when he said he would be as budget director.

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