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This article begins on page 1, then to pages 24 and 25

Forum sets up battle for control at city hall *(part 1)*

Potter vs. Baron vs. Byrne for mayor

By Mary Schley

A SEASONED politician, a councilman with six years at the dais, and a community organizer who founded a nonprofit during Covid to spearhead beautification projects around town made their cases at a forum Tuesday for why voters should choose them to be Carmel's next mayor.

Following a panel featuring the five candidates for city council, incumbent Mayor Dave Potter and challengers Jeff Baron and Dale Byrne got their turn on stage at the Carmel Residents Association event, which was moderated by Pine Cone publisher Paul Miller.



PHOTO/MANNY ESPINOZA

A Carmel Residents Association forum with (at table, left to right) mayoral candidates Jeff Baron, Dale Byrne and Dave Potter drew a big crowd Tuesday.

'New leader' needed

In his opening statement, Baron described his busy schedule on behalf of the city and said he works so hard in his service on the council and other boards because "Carmel is incredibly important to me."

"If we don't work to protect it, it will erode over time," he said. "It requires a city government that listens to residents, especially those who can't attend meetings." Since first winning his council seat in 2018, Baron has distributed a newsletter to constituents and held regular "office hours" at a downtown café. A hallmark of his campaign is knocking on doors.

Byrne, the founder of Carmel Cares, said the city "needs a breath of fresh air and a new leader."

"We hear government should be for the people, but we see it being done to the people," he said. "I am offering leadership that has already made visible improvements." Potter explained some of his health issues, including a back surgery that requires him to get up and move every

30 minutes, before arguing for maintaining the status quo as much as possible on a council that will inevitably see two new people elected in November, since neither incumbent councilmember is running.

“We’ve come a long way together, and now is not the time to change leadership,” he said, adding that during his tenure, the city rebounded well from the Covid period, embarked on an ambitious capital improvement plan and hired back much needed staff.

A big question

“What is working well and what would you change?” was the first question given to candidates, who each had one minute to answer.

Byrne said Carmel Cares — the non-profit he founded and which he mentioned frequently during the forum — works well with the city, and Potter said the city’s public involvement “is going well” and that he wouldn’t change much.

Potter also suggested it was the city’s financial help that got Carmel Cares going — an assertion Byrne challenged during his time to answer the next question.

Only Baron mentioned what he would change. After remarking that city staff interacts well with the public, he said he would reconfigure the dais so the council sits at the center, with the city administrator and city attorney off to the side, that he would “change the way we do strategic planning to get all of council to pull in the same direction,” and that the annual State of the City talk would be held for free at the woman’s club, not at the annual \$150-per-person Carmel Chamber of Commerce membership lunch at Spanish Bay.

While Baron and Potter were fine with the 2024-2025 budget, which calls for \$43.5 million in spending and \$31.4 million in revenues — with the difference coming from prior years’ savings and earmarked mostly for capital projects — Byrne said the public isn’t involved in budget planning enough and that “all of a sudden at the end, everything happens very quickly, with no control.”

He criticized the council for spending too much on consultants and overpaying for projects like fixing the beach stairways, or not fixing them at all.

Speaking of consultants, the best way to combat the California Legislature’s tendency to force-feed mandates to cities where they can’t or won’t work, according to Baron, is to hire “a consultant whose job it is to talk to Sacramento legislators.”

“That’s how the process works in California, so we have to decide as a community whether it’s important to hire a consultant to talk to legislators,” he said.

Byrne said Carmel is known worldwide and that decision makers should tap that power. “When a city’s story about street addresses becomes an international story, we have superpowers we’re not using,” he said. “We have to be aggressive and fight back against things we think we can win.”

Potter said representatives of the state’s cities are not being effective in getting their messages across to legislators, including Sen. John Laird and Assemblymember Dawn Addis. “When we have local representatives going to Sacramento, it does make a difference, and we have to get them down here more,” he said.



Jeff Baron



Dale Byrne



Dave Potter

On everyone's mind

Potter's and Baron's positions on house numbers are well documented, with Potter generally opposing the idea but proposing it for a public vote in November 2025, and Baron favoring a change and pushing for a ballot measure sooner than later.

Potter also condemned councilwoman Karen Ferlito for proceeding with her research after her ad hoc committee with councilwoman Alissandra Dramov fell apart. "She went in there and drove the train herself," he said. "I don't think that was the right thing."

"I think the city council could have taken steps to put it on the ballot in March 2025," Baron said.

Byrne mentioned Carmel Cares' role as a city support group and its meetings with the mayor and city attorney to illustrate that "process is important."

"Time and time and time again, we're having bad process," he said. "The address situation was absolutely bad process." He believes a compromise can be struck.

On the police station, Potter and Byrne said they agree it should be remodeled, and Baron said he's "100 percent on board with whatever," though he'd like various alternatives evaluated before a making decision.

"I think the city council took a wrong turn in limiting the city's options," when the majority voted in July to study on the remodel scenario, he said.

Speak up

Observing that many residents don't attend city council meetings, Baron said he'd increase community engagement by knocking on doors and holding community meetings to "talk to people who live here and find out what they want by asking them and listening to what they say."

Byrne said he'd like to change the way council meetings are run "to make them more interesting and engaging,"

When you speak at a council meeting, you have to feel like you're being heard," he said, adding that meetings should be shorter and more frequent. "I talk to people in the street all the time – they love to talk to us."

Potter acknowledged the council could be more responsive to constituents and should consider holding more sessions.

Mayoral candidates also weighted in on city attorney Brian Pierik and whether he should engage more with the public (Byrne and Potter said yes, and Baron said no), the impacts of large commercial projects (all said they worried about too much construction happening at the same

time), and public salaries, which all three said should be high enough to attract and retain qualified employees.

They also agreed it was good the city got its housing element approved by the state's deadline, through Bryne lamented having to hire consultants to write it and then having to hire more to help fix it.

"It's going to be a lot of work to get those units off our parking lots," Byrne said of the affordable housing allocated to public property at Sunset Center and Vista Lobos in the plan. "But we're working hard to do it."

Potter observed that everyone running for office this year is a White man and said he'd like to see more diversity in the community, which affordable housing would facilitate, and Baron remarked that it's unfortunate that firefighters, police officers, teachers and the like generally can't afford to live here.

Candidates also fielded questions specifically written for them, including how Byrne would continue serving with Carmel Cares if he's elected mayor and how Potter could do a better job of interacting with the public and speaking his mind on important issues.

"Some people think I already am mayor," quipped Byrne, who said his non-profit has a broad well-equipped to take charge. "I will encourage the council to pay more attention to these city support groups. They have an incredible ability to get things done at a lower cost."

How to budget

If elected mayor, Baron said he would initiate a revamp of the budget process to get more of the public involved in deciding how their tax dollars are spent.

In closing, Byrne promised to "bring the same collaborative, hands-on approach" he used in creating Carmel Cares and getting project done to the city hall, Potter said he hopes voters see him as the best mayoral candidate and pledged to be more open, more transparent and more involved, and Baron said the community is unified by its love of Carmel and touted his leadership skills, ethics, transparency and ability to "be humble in victory and gracious in defeat."

To watch the forum, visit youtu.be/PR9ewa33r14

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