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## TCPalm Editorial Board recommendations 2024: Martin County Commission seats | Our View

**Editorial Board** TCPALM/Treasure Coast Newspapers

Published 5:02 a.m. ET July 14, 2024 | Updated 5:02 a.m. ET July 14, 2024

**TERM:** Four years

**DISTRICT 1 CANDIDATES:** Doug Smith, 62, and Eileen Vargas, 68

**DISTRICT 3 CANDIDATES:** Blake Capps, 60; Frank D'Ambra, 70; and Susan Gibbs Thomas, 63

**DISTRICT 5 CANDIDATES:** Ed Ciampi, 58 (turns 59 before Election Day); Bruce Nathan, 63; and Michael Syrkus, 37

**KEY ISSUES:** Growth and development, protection of water resources, traffic, budget management

**More:** Martin County Primary Election 2024: Candidates reply to questionnaires

In discussing who should represent districts 1, 3 and 5 on the Martin County Commission, it's important to think about what the word "represent" means. Simply put, a representative is someone who speaks or acts on behalf of a particular constituency – which, in this case, is all of the people living in Martin County.

So the question before voters in the Aug. 20 elections is: Who among the qualified candidates would best represent your interests?

For years, locals have spoken of "the Martin County difference." It means different things to different people, but it's commonly associated with a more conservative approach to growth and development than found in the county's neighbors to the north and south.

Martin County is perceived to be a place with less development, spread over larger areas of land, with great deference given to protecting watersheds and other environmental resources.

With three of the five commission seats on the ballot, voters have the ability in a single day to change the direction in which Martin County government is moving, for better or worse. Or, by re-electing two longtime incumbents, they can essentially guarantee county government will continue along its current path.

If you've attended commission meetings in recent years where high-profile land-use cases were heard, you know there's a segment of the local population deeply disappointed in some of the commissioners' decisions.

Do people who have voiced their displeasure accurately represent the way most residents feel, or is it just a vocal minority? This year's election will help determine that.

## **District 1**

Smith, the District 1 incumbent, has served on the commission 24 years. He's most often voted with the majority on key decisions, including approval for high-profile developments. As such, voters should know what they are getting with Smith. If re-elected, it will send the message residents are generally happy with the way Martin County has grown and changed over the past two-plus decades.

Based on the cursory answers he provided in response to TCPalm's questionnaire and during our interview with him and Vargas, he's planning to keep doing what he's been doing. (As an aside, he said he's got no problem with the quirk in election law that allows closed primaries if at least one write-in candidate is in a race, which has the practical effect of disenfranchising almost half of the county's registered voters in his past few elections.)

Vargas, a financial planner and educator, vows to take a much tougher stance on growth. She believes there's too much traffic and contends local residents have been "betrayed" by a commission "unresponsive" to their needs. She would keep the county's urban services boundary in place, preserving laws that limit residential density to no more than one house per 20 acres.

While her remarks sound promising, she didn't show much depth behind broad talking points. Although her resume demonstrates some civic involvement, she seems to lack experience with the type of work local government does.

While we know voters must make a choice, we can't offer a recommendation in this race.

## **District 3**

Each candidate vying to replace Harold Jenkins in District 3 brings significant public service to the table.

D'Ambra served on the Tequesta Village Council for nine years, so he has a good understanding of how local government works. However, he's lived in Martin County for only about a year, which puts him at a distinct disadvantage against two opponents whose community ties run much deeper.

Thomas says she has lived in Martin County for 50 years, serving on numerous civic and governmental boards. Although she opposed the annexation of Indiantown, she has served as the village's mayor and council member. The county would benefit from having a commissioner who understands issues in and around fast-growing Indiantown.

Capps, another longtime resident, whose family owns a roofing company in Hobe Sound, has never been an elected official, but has served on boards and commissions that have helped him develop a strong working knowledge of county government. That includes time on the Martin County community redevelopment and local planning agencies, the county's metropolitan planning organization and the Hobe Sound Neighborhood Advisory Committee.

He resigned from the planning agency after a disagreement with Jenkins, who had recommended him for the job, over the county's so-called "rural lifestyle" land use.

Capps seems to understand, perhaps a bit better than the other two candidates, the importance of protecting Martin County's rural areas. Rather than assuming developers are entitled to make land-use changes to suit their wishes, Capps would place the burden of proof on them to show why existing laws must be changed.

That's no subtle shift: In recent years, the commission has seemed predisposed to approve higher-density uses, in effect giving higher priority to the "property rights" of developers than existing property owners.

Capps vowed to be a good steward of the county's environmental resources, while maintaining a fiscally conservative approach toward the county's budget.

For those reasons and more, he is the best candidate in this race.

## **District 5**

In District 5, Ciampi, another longtime incumbent, faces challenges from Nathan and Syrkus.

Ciampi is personable, accessible and a dedicated public servant. However, some of his decision-making in recent years has been inconsistent.

For example, he voted in 2022 against the rural lifestyle land use, which allows higher-density housing in rural areas if it's offset by open space within the same development, even if that open space is used for golf courses, polo grounds or other recreational amenities.

Then, earlier this year, Ciampi voted with the commission majority to allow rural lifestyle projects to be built more than a mile outside the county's urban services areas, as opposed to only adjacent to them. There was no public policy justification for expanding where rural lifestyle projects could be built; the change was made at the request of a developer.

Ciampi also persuaded his colleagues last year to buy property in Palm City rather than allow developers to build apartments there. Ciampi suggested the land buy was a special case, which couldn't be replicated in other communities where residents oppose development projects.

It seemed like Ciampi was trying to have it both ways, helping residents of his commission district avoid an undesirable development while telling others there wasn't enough money available to buy out other developers.

Syrkus, a carpenter and farmer, seems better prepared than Nathan to represent the district if voters are ready to make a change. He's done his homework by attending commission meetings and developing an understanding of the budget process.

He said he doesn't see the need for major changes in the county's comprehensive plan and believes it was "absolutely foolish" to amend the rural lifestyle land use to allow land so far outside the urban services boundary to be eligible for more intense development.

He has good ideas about allowing the Save Our Homes property tax exemption to be passed down in families and to help create opportunities to provide "essential housing" for young families, senior citizens and essential workers.

We recommend him for this seat.

*TCPalm's candidate recommendations are decided collectively by its Editorial Board.*

*Recommendations are based on nonpartisan criteria that prioritize the best candidates for our local community.*