

State hopefuls trade barbs

Pruitt, Tharinger vie for House seat

By Peter Segall

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Brian Pruitt, a Republican candidate for state House of Representatives District 24, Position 2, left, speaks during a candidate debate at Joshua's Restaurant in Port Angeles on Tuesday. Pruitt is challenging incumbent Steve Tharinger, a Democrat who's held the seat since 2010, seated at right. (Peter Segall/Peninsula Daily News)

Candidates for the state House of Representatives District 24 traded barbs and took questions from constituents over coffee Tuesday morning at Joshua's Restaurant during a debate hosted by the Port Angeles Business Association.

Incumbent Steve Tharinger, a Democrat from Port Townsend who's been in office since 2010, sat with Republican challenger Brian Pruitt, taking turns answering questions and pitching themselves to the roughly two dozen attendees.

A third candidate, Democrat [Darren Corcoran](#), was scheduled to be at the event but was unable to attend due to health concerns, according to PABA President Joe McEnitre.

The Washington state primary is Aug. 2, and the deadline to register to vote is July 25.

Tharinger said his seniority in the Legislature and positions on several key committees has allowed him to ensure projects and services on the North Olympic Peninsula are being adequately funded. His seats on the House Appropriations and Health Care and Wellness Committees secured money for health and dental clinics on the Peninsula, Tharinger said, as well as made investments in transportation infrastructure.

"The Legislature is continuing to make investments that both create jobs and have long-term benefit for the economy moving forward," Tharinger said.

But Pruiett took aim at Tharinger's record and spending by the Democratic majority in the Legislature whose policies, he said, increased costs and failed to produce results.

"Our schools have a 70 percent failure rate in math," Pruiett said. "How many of you are going to hire a clerk that can't read or write?"

Pruiett and members of the audience were critical of Tharinger for his support of several bills limiting actions by law enforcement passed following the murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer in May 2020. One bill mentioned was House Bill 1054 — which Tharinger is named as a cosponsor — which limits law enforcement's ability to pursue vehicles fleeing from a traffic stop.

Under that bill, law enforcement officers can only pursue vehicles fleeing a traffic stop if there is probable cause to suspect certain kinds of crimes, including violent crimes and driving under the influence.

Pruiett called the laws "idiotic" and Tharinger said there was a need to refine the law but defended some of the bill's other impacts.

HB 1054 also banned the use of chokeholds — which is what killed Floyd — and no-knock warrant searches and prohibits law enforcement agencies from purchasing certain types of military equipment, including .50-caliber ammunition, [according to the bill's synopsis](#).

"These reforms have cut the number of homicides by law enforcement by 40 percent," Tharinger said. "When we talk about being safe and feeling secure in their communities, that's on both sides of the blue line."

Several questions were asked about affordable housing, and Tharinger said the region needs more higher-density housing, which makes things like infrastructure and transportation more economical, he said.

Pruiett said state lawmakers had increased the cost of construction through increased environmental regulation, what he called "green building codes."

"We need to look very hard at the costs that have been added on," Pruiett said. "That amplifies the cost of housing."

Many of the issues discussed related to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts on the economy. Inflation was a concern, even as audience members acknowledged that issue is managed at the federal level, as was the rising costs of fuel and commodities.

The air between the two candidates was tense at times, with Pruiett rolling his eyes at many of Tharinger's statements, and Tharinger at one point calling Pruiett "naive" about the state budgeting process.

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