



Everything New Orleans

The Times-Picayune

Competence, character frame debate

Candidates square off in last televised forum

Friday, May 19, 2006

By Michelle Krupa
and Frank Donze%%par%%Staff writers

Like the countless forums that preceded Thursday's final televised debate between incumbent Mayor Ray Nagin and Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu before Saturday's runoff, the candidates admitted that at the root, their plans to resuscitate the ravaged city are basically the same.

▼ [Advertisement](#)

[CONTINUE STORY](#)

**Throw Me
Something F.E.M.A.**

A print by George Rodrigue
Benefitting the New Orleans
Museum of Art

BUY ONLINE
www.bluedogrelief.com

But bubbling to the top of the otherwise agreeable discourse were a pair of issues that embodied the questions of competence and character that have framed the political fight throughout: the uncertain state of City Hall's finances, and whether New Orleans' recovery should led by a businessman known to shoot from the hip or a career politician from a family of elected leaders.

Sparks flew during the hourlong debate on WWL-TV over whether Nagin has sugarcoated the city's financial health and about the veracity of his announcement Monday that his administration has secured a \$150 million line of credit that would help maintain day-to-day operations through 2007.

Citing the mayor's lack of details about the deal, news anchor Lucy Bustamante asked how Nagin would respond to critics who painted the news as an "election-eve stunt."

"I say to them, go talk to JPMorgan Chase," the lead lender in the agreement, Nagin said. "This is not about politics. This is about making sure our city has the resources necessary to get the job done."

Nagin said he did not name the other three banks involved because "they're a little hesitant about putting their names out there until everything is signed, sealed and delivered."

Bustamante pressed the mayor on why he didn't then wait until the deal was done.

"Because they want to give people comfort," Nagin said. "There a lot of debate and discussion about this city running out of money."

After Nagin's interrogation by Bustamante, Landrieu trod lightly. He said the city has a few options to handle its fiscal nightmare, including borrowing money from the state through a process laid out by federal laws or, as a last resort, to declare bankruptcy, an option put forth by a pair of good-government groups.

Pressed by anchor Dennis Woltering about whether he had "investigated this yourself," Landrieu said he had read independent reports on the issue. But in the end, Landrieu said his ability to address the problem was hampered by a lack of information from the Nagin administration.

"You don't really know what the financial strength of the city is because it really is not open and transparent," Landrieu said. "The only people who have all the information about the city's finances is the city administration."

Public pedigree

Landrieu's turn on the hot seat came amid questions from Nagin about whether his political pedigree, which the mayor frequently has defined as the Landrieu "dynasty," represents an asset or a liability.

"Let me be clear about the dynasty piece: It has nothing to do with whether your family has integrity or not. It's an issue of, what is too much?" Nagin asked, referring to Landrieu's sister, U.S. Sen. May Landrieu; his father, Moon Landrieu, a former mayor and appeals court judge; his aunt, a member of the Orleans Parish School Board; and another sister who is state civil district court judge.

"I have people who come up to me, business people, that say, 'There's so much power consolidated in the Landrieu family. How are we going to make sure that that stays on an even keel?' "

Landrieu responded by saying that in his 18 years in public service, plus the decades under his relatives' belts, they never have been accused of ethical misconduct. "It's extraordinary, you would have to admit, that we have served for that number of years and never had our integrity questioned and never abused our power," he said.

On the same page

Outside the two hot-button topics, Nagin and Landrieu agreed on a slew of issues: having fewer residents in public housing developments; honoring a pact that both signed to give All Congregations Together input on mayoral appointments; and exploring the option of merging the city's crippled electrical utility, Entergy New Orleans, with its much healthier statewide parent, Entergy Louisiana, to prevent skyrocketing rates.

Indeed, with so much consensus on so many issues a frequent theme of the mayoral campaign, anchor Sally Ann Roberts kicked off Thursday's debate by asking, "On what specific issue do you disagree?"

Nagin paused for several seconds. "On what issue do we disagree," the mayor repeated, then paused again. "I don't know. I can't think of one right now."

Given that drawn-out moment to gather his thoughts, Landrieu upended Roberts' veiled criticism and took a shot at the news media.

"It's not a liability that we don't disagree on the issues," he said. "The whole purpose has been to try to get everybody from the federal to the state to the local government on the same page. I know it provides good fodder for you guys on TV for us to fight about issues. But the truth of the matter is that trying to get everyone on the same page is one of the most important things."

One regret, please

In closing, the candidates offered a poignant epilogue to a long but mostly genteel campaign that has unfolded, despite the occasional nod to life before Katrina, under the uncertain shadow of the Aug 29 storm. Each was asked to recount one regret from the past nine months.

"I regret taking longer than I should to decide to run for mayor," said Landrieu, whose name was floated early as a possible contender but who did not formally jump into the race until February.

"One of the things that I was really concerned about early on was whether or not the sacrifice that was going to be required was something that everybody in the state and the city was willing to make," he said. "It is important now that we really dig down deep because the next couple of years in this city . . . is going to require a tremendous amount of perseverance and sacrifice."

Nagin, whose post-Katrina tenure has been plagued by intermittent rhetorical missteps that have raised eyebrows across the country, offered his contrition to the tens of thousands of residents whom Katrina cast out of New Orleans.

"The only regret that I have is, I wish I had gotten out earlier to talk to residents who had been displaced," the mayor said. "There were so many people out there that were hurting, and they wanted to see some leader from New Orleans, from Louisiana, to at least hear what they were going through."

.

Michelle Krupa can be reached at mkrupa@timespicayune.com or (504) 826-3312.