

## Mayoral candidates are throwing elbows - Landrieu targeted in pair of forums

Times-Picayune, The (New Orleans, LA) - Wednesday, January 6, 2010

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After a nearly three-week holiday hiatus, the six major candidates running for New Orleans mayor returned to the campaign trail Tuesday in back-to-back evening forums that revealed what's likely to become a key strategy of the last month before the Feb. 6 primary: attack front-runner Lt. Gov. Mitch Landrieu.

Doing most of the shooting were attorney Rob Couhig and businessman John Georges, who has already hit Landrieu with the campaign's only attack ad so far.

The forums -- focused, respectively, on real estate and youth issues -- offered the first glimpse at a newly reshuffled field that in past weeks has lost a pair of key contenders, including its leading black candidate, state Sen. Ed Murray, potentially setting up a scenario that could give the city its first white mayor since 1978 and fueled Tuesday's steady, low-grade needling among Landrieu, Georges and Couhig, who all are white.

Vying to the fill the vacuum left by Murray, known as an effective if soft-spoken lawmaker, the panel's three African-American candidates -- management consultant Troy Henry, fair-housing advocate James Perry and former Civil District Court Judge Nadine Ramsey -- pushed their own talking points and generally refrained from the attack.

Murray dropped out of the race Sunday, citing difficulty in raising money and a desire to avoid a racially divisive campaign, while education-reform advocate Leslie Jacobs said she could not compete with Landrieu, who jumped into the race on the eve of qualifying last month and instantly became the front-runner thanks to his lengthy political resume and near-universal name recognition.

The night's most heated moment came during the youth forum at Walter L. Cohen High School in Central City, with Couhig and Landrieu engaging in a quick exchange that hit the top of the volume meter.

Couhig and Landrieu are the only two current candidates who tried unsuccessfully to unseat Mayor Ray Nagin in 2006. Couhig finished fourth in the primary, then endorsed Nagin, who edged out Landrieu in the runoff. Term limits bar Nagin from seeking re-election this year.

Asked Tuesday night about the New Orleans Police Department, Couhig criticized Landrieu for declining four years ago to join him in advocating the immediate firing of Police Superintendent Warren Riley.

"I was very disappointed that Mitch thought that was an issue to be studied," he said.

Though it wasn't his turn to speak, Landrieu asked moderator Rachel Wulff, an anchor at WDSU-TV, for a chance to defend himself.

"Rob, you did support the guy who hired Warren Riley," Landrieu said.

"I gave you every opportunity to tell me that you'd do something different than (Nagin), and you didn't!" Couhig erupted before admitting: "It was a mistake supporting him."

Later when candidates were allowed to pose questions to one another, Couhig, seeking an assist from Ramsey, asked the former judge what lesson students can glean from someone who takes a job in government, then uses that time "to run for office repeatedly." Clearly targeting Landrieu, Ramsey pointed out that as a judge, she had to resign to run for mayor, then added that citizens don't like it when elected officials run for other offices without quitting their current jobs.

The dust-ups were by no means the evening's first confrontations.

**Exhibit S**  
Bernofsky v. Road Home

During the earlier housing forum at the Academy of the Sacred Heart in Uptown, Georges noted that \$3 billion in federal recovery grants remain in the coffers of the Louisiana Recovery Authority, and he questioned "the leadership of any individual" in state government for failing to distribute the money.

Landrieu, acknowledging that the jab was aimed at him, stated that the lieutenant governor's office has no control over the LRA. He bit back by questioning why City Hall has not spent all the recovery money in its accounts.

Jumping into the fray, Couhig took issue with an earlier statement by Georges that the New Orleans Redevelopment Authority, of which Couhig was a board member until he declared his candidacy for mayor, should not handle the purchase of single lots in an effort to return blighted and abandoned properties to commerce. Georges said NORA's participation makes the transaction more expensive.

Couhig countered that NORA is the cheapest way to dispose of unwanted properties, and he vowed to create a \$15 million revolving fund to fix up and sell properties.

Perry focused on the need to grow the population to sop up housing, since the city has the capacity to shelter about 600,000 people, but only about half that many residents. Creating an annual housing plan, as required by the City Charter, would be one of the first things he would do as mayor, he said.

Ramsey said that she would enforce blight laws and make sure that code enforcement departments have adequate funding. She also stressed the importance of neighborhoods and promised to use federal block grants to help home buyers when the federal homebuyer tax credits expire next spring.

Henry referred to his experiences in rebuilding Pontchartrain Park and helping to develop the city's energy-efficiency program. By cobbling together soft second mortgages, hazard mitigation grants and energy-efficiency measures, he said it's possible to give people a great deal of equity in their homes and lower their electric bills.

On city finances, Couhig said his administration would enact no new taxes. Georges vowed to cut taxes. Landrieu said that his budget will reflect his priorities of blight, crime, jobs and schools. Henry said he would sell unneeded city assets and streamline government operations to eliminate unnecessary services.

Regarding job growth, Perry and Ramsey said they would help small- and medium-size businesses improve their access to credit. Couhig said the cost of utility rates and insurance needs to drop. Georges said that he would pursue more direct flights from Armstrong International Airport.

In addition to recruiting large companies, Henry said he would ask the White House to send more permanent federal jobs to New Orleans. And Landrieu focused on the importance of public-private partnerships.

After more than two hours of jousting Tuesday night, the candidates split along racial lines when asked the next-to-last question of the youth forum: whether the Recreation Department should be removed from City Hall oversight and turned into a stand-alone agency.

Landrieu, Georges and Couhig said, yes. Henry and Ramsey flatly opposed the suggestion, while Perry said no, though he said he could be convinced.

Despite the evening's rampant conflict, the intense night of debating ended on a conciliatory note, with the mayoral contenders finally agreeing on a question that even organizers conceded was a no-brainer in an auditorium full of students: "Will you include youth in your transition team?" Said Landrieu: "We should all answer this together."

Also running for mayor, though considered long shots, are Jonah Bascle, Manny "Chevrolet" Bruno, Jerry Jacobs, Thomas Lambert and Norbert Rome.

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**Record Number:** 424954488

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