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Times recommends | Pinellas County Commission

Return commission to the mainstream

For Pinellas voters, this election is about more than whether three County Commission incumbents should keep their jobs. This is about re-establishing the county's identity and its mainstream values. Do we still care about the health of our residents and respect established science in ways that attract families and jobs? Or have we become an ideologically driven backwater that takes fluoride out of the drinking water, caves in to vocal extremists and refuses to invest in the future?

Voters should send a strong message by replacing two of the Fluoride Four - Nancy Bostock and Neil Brickfield - and re-electing Ken Welch, who refused to be cowed and stood with the nation's leading health experts. For decades, the Pinellas County Commission reflected pragmatic local government. It has become an ideological swamp, and that has tarnished the county's reputation. Voters should start draining the swamp by replacing Brickfield and Bostock with two seasoned former state legislators. Janet Long and Charlie Justice better reflect the county's sensibilities, history and vision - and they would immediately vote to put fluoride back into the drinking water.

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Janet Long

District 1, countywide

Four years ago in the Republican primary for this seat, the Times recommended a mainstream moderate who was defeated by Neil Brickfield. In the general election, we recommended Brickfield because he was knowledgeable about county government and there was no viable alternative. As we feared, Brickfield has proven to be too beholden to the most conservative wing of his party. His vote to take fluoride out of the water is the most egregious example.

This year, there is a far better alternative.

Janet Long, 67, is a former Seminole City Council member and state legislator who has an impressive record of public service. She is not afraid to stand up for children or consumers in the face of vocal opposition. She is socially moderate and



fiscally conservative, and the Democrat made such a first impression in Tallahassee that Republicans asked her to switch parties after one term.

Long recognizes government has a responsibility to protect the public health, and she pledges to vote to resume adding fluoride to the water. She wants to maintain a unified countywide emergency medical service and says the commission should have made changes to reduce EMS expenses and avoid a tax increase. She wants to improve mass transit, expects the county to be active in talks about a new stadium for the Tampa Bay Rays and says those two issues ought to be part of the same discussion about preparing Pinellas for the future. Long supports the Safe Harbor homeless shelter and says the county should be exploring more ways to share services with cities.

Brickfield, 49, too often tries to appease both his tea party supporters and more moderate business interests. He didn't support county budgets even after they included deep spending cuts and eliminated hundreds of jobs. He has voted against reasonable spending on social programs, then supported smaller expenditures. He provided the decisive vote to extend the tourist tax to help the Salvador Dali Museum cover a construction shortfall, but only after insisting that part of the tax expire in 2021.

Don't expect Brickfield to invest in the future. He promises to vote to put a transit plan before the voters, but he likely would oppose any plan that includes light rail. He agrees the Tampa Bay Rays need a new stadium, but it is hard to imagine him voting to spend significant public money on one.

Brickfield's vote to stop adding fluoride to the drinking water is at odds with his interest in creating high-tech jobs and supporting education. Even worse, he has defended his vote by spreading fear and inaccurately describing the positions of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on fluoride.

For Pinellas County Commission District 1, the Tampa Bay Times recommends Janet Long.

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Charlie Justice

District 3, countywide

Nancy Bostock has been a profound disappointment in her first term on the County Commission. The Times recommended the Republican four years ago based on her credible performance on a dysfunctional School Board. We presumed Bostock's socially conservative views would not be as concerning on a county commission that provides basic services.



We were wrong. Bostock is the partisan ideologue on the commission, frustrating her colleagues and the professional county staff. She turns countless votes into values litmus tests, voting against everything from the summer fertilizer ban to Meals on Wheels. She voted against the latest county budget because it included a tax increase to pay for Medicaid costs passed on by the state.

Bostock, 44, frames her vote to take fluoride out of the drinking water as support for individual choice and limited government. She fails to appreciate the importance of protecting public health.

Charlie Justice is a far better choice. The Democrat is a former state legislator with a low-key demeanor and mainstream values. The University of South Florida St. Petersburg administrator understands the intersection between education and job creation, and the need to balance the demand for county services with economic realities.

Justice, 44, recognizes the damage that has been done to the county's reputation, and he would vote to restore fluoride to the drinking water. Unlike Bostock, he has a broader vision of the county's future that includes improved mass transit and discussing a new stadium for the Tampa Bay Rays.

As a centrist, Justice moves easily between members of both political parties, business leaders and educators. He understands how to build coalitions and partnerships to consolidate services, create jobs and develop compromises on issues such as EMS. For example, he wants the county to focus more on growing existing businesses and less on providing tax breaks to bring new companies that don't always deliver the promised jobs.

In 10 years in the Legislature, Justice supported ethics and elections reforms; renewable energy and smart environmental initiatives; and efforts to protect seniors and help homeowners fortify their houses against hurricanes. He would bring those same forward-looking sensibilities to the County Commission.

For Pinellas County Commission District 3, the Tampa Bay Times recommends Charlie Justice.

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Ken Welch

District 7, South Pinellas

Ken Welch is a voice of reason on the Pinellas County Commission, and as the commission's only Democrat and African-American he speaks up



for minorities and low-income residents whose concerns might otherwise go unnoticed. The St. Petersburg resident has served this south Pinellas district well, balancing his efforts on local issues and those of countywide importance.

Welch, 48, has served on the commission since 2000 and often is aligned with more moderate Republican commissioners such as Susan Latvala and Karen Seel. Those three commissioners stood against the tea party crowd and for the public health when they voted to keep fluoride in the county's drinking water supply and lost by a 4-3 vote. Welch remains committed to putting fluoride back into the water with the help of one more vote.

On several key county issues, Welch has played a leading role in steering the discussion. He was an early advocate for Safe Harbor, which provides shelter and services to the homeless. He understands that Pinellas needs viable mass transit, and he has helped develop a transit plan that combines improved bus service with light rail that voters will be asked to approve. Similarly, Welch recognizes that the county should play a role in the discussions with the Tampa Bay Rays over a new baseball stadium. He also is willing to compromise on overhauling emergency medical services and look at alternatives such as allowing St. Petersburg firefighters to transport emergency patients to hospitals in return for some cost savings.

Buck Walz, 33, is a St. Petersburg native and first-time candidate for public office. The Republican is the operations manager for a building materials company, opposes adding fluoride back into the water and supports allowing voters to decide the fate of a transit plan. He says the commission should have cut more spending rather than approve property tax rate increases that covered EMS shortfalls and Medicaid costs passed on by the state. But Walz has no suggestions for what to cut, and he has a superficial grasp of some of the county's most pressing issues.

Welch's experience and foresight - and his willingness to stand with established science and public health in the fluoride controversy - are particularly valuable on a commission with too little backbone and vision. For Pinellas County Commission District 7, the Tampa Bay Times recommends Ken Welch.

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Candidate replies

The Tampa Bay Times offers candidates not recommended by the editorial board an opportunity to reply. Candidates for Pinellas County Commission should send their replies no later than 5 p.m. Tuesday to: Tim Nickens, editor of editorials, Tampa Bay Times, P.O. Box 1121, St. Petersburg, FL 33731; by fax: (727) 893-8675; or through our web site at: www.tampabay.com/letters. Replies are limited to 150 words.