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Ziffer, Jackson clash at Tiger Bay luncheon

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Candidates vying for City Commission Seat 3 stayed composed Tuesday compared to what turned into a verbal clash between City Commissioner Gil Ziffer and Erwin Jackson, one of his challengers for Seat 5.

The candidate forum was held at the Civic Center by the Capital Tiger Bay Club — a group of prominent members and guests whose monthly meetings have a reputation of throwing a hint of humor in with serious matters. Among the issues discussed heavily were a need for better budget management, open government, neighborhood and water protections, job creation, affordable housing and attention to children.

Seat 3 candidates are Stephen Hogge, Nancy Miller and Bill Rollins. Seat 5 candidates are James Moran, Jackson and Ziffer.

Jackson, who has a doctorate in psychology, said he read an article stating Ziffer didn't have an associate's degree from the University of Florida, although Ziffer thought he did.

"Since I can see how easily you could get confused," Jackson said to Ziffer, "let me just make a suggestion: Go to your office, look around on the walls and if you don't see a diploma from the University of Florida, you probably don't have a degree."

Jackson then attempted to hand Ziffer a phony copy of a diploma labeled "Doctorate of Spin" for allegedly hiring a "mudslinger" to research code violations against him and then leaking the information to the *Tallahassee Democrat*. Ziffer didn't accept the paper.

Earlier, Ziffer joked about not realizing that he had not received his associate's degree. He also offered up that it was true that a house he once shared went into foreclosure following a divorce years ago. He said he felt compelled to address this since he had received an anonymous letter at City Hall in which the person promised to make it public.

But the phony degree sheet triggered Ziffer to strongly question Jackson's motives. He said Jackson did not publicly admit to having 119 code violations related to his rental properties in town. Jackson owns more than 200 units, mostly occupied by college students.

"Some of us accept the fact that we didn't get a degree, and some of us accept that fact that we had a foreclosed house," Ziffer said. "This man accepts nothing. You have to wonder what does he really stand for and why does he really want to get on this City Commission."

Moran didn't target his opponents directly. Instead, he said some of the city's issues are not new ones. He said more attention is needed in creating a culture of open government, increasing affordable housing and addressing issues related to children.

"We are looking to give a Band-Aid fit, the same fit for every situation," Moran said.

Hogge, a past president of the Council On Neighborhood Associations, said he's been an advocate for neighborhood preservation and neighborhood protection. "When you look at the issues that are going to be facing this community," Hogge said, "no issue is more important than our budget."

Rollins said the city needs to expand its aviation industry. He also proposed the creation of a more robust research industry, mainly focused on the

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local universities. Rollins added, "I would also like to continue to work with the Legislature, federal government and businesses to revitalize ... our economic development."

Miller said she helped create jobs by drumming up support for the penny sales tax passed in 2000.

"A \$300-million investment in our community has created a huge number of jobs in this town. So I would like credit for having brought jobs to Tallahassee," Miller said.

In a straw poll, Hogge received 50 votes; Miller received 40; and Rollins received 1. Ziffer received 78 votes; Jackson received 13; and Moran received 12.



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At right, Erwin Jackson tries to present Gil Ziffer with a "Doctorate of Spin" certificate during Capital Tiger Bay Club's forum for City Commission Seats 3 and 5 on Tuesday at the Civic Center. Ziffer declined to accept it; he recently had to file some paperwork to officially receive his associate's degree from the University of Florida, after it was called into question. (PHIL SEARS/Democrat)



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Jim Morgan releases hermit crabs, each one picked by one of the three Seat 3 candidates, in a race after Capital Tiger Bay Club's forum for City Commission Seats 3 and 5 on Tuesday. "Piggy," a hermit crab named by Stephen Hogge (right), crossed the finish line first. Morgan said the creatures predicted the Super Bowl winner four out of the last five times, so Hogge's win could be auspicious. (PHIL SEARS/Democrat)