

Incumbent and challenger take their cases to voters Chilton asks if Dillon is doing enough



April 26, 2014 • [PETER JENSEN](#)

How well Napa County is handling key issues such as road maintenance, growth and development, traffic, and funding for affordable housing and farmworker housing is a question voters in the Upvalley 3rd Supervisor District will be asking as they prepare to vote in the June 3 primary.

Asking it to the two candidates, however, will produce starkly different answers.

To Lewis Chilton, vice mayor for the town of Yountville and owner of the Yountville Deli, the county has clearly failed to fully address some issues while ignoring others completely.

Walking precincts in the 3rd District, Chilton urges voters to support him by saying that the county has been too difficult for cities to work with on shared issues.

In the northern neighborhoods of the city of Napa, Chilton touts getting four out of five members of the Napa City Council to endorse him — evidence, he says, of the city's desire for change.

"I've always been a big believer in government doing the basics," Chilton said. "We're a small county. Working together is essential. The county can be a bit heavy-handed in the way it does its business."

Chilton says he is politically independent — the seat he's seeking is nonpartisan — but as he reminded a voter, "I'm pretty conservative when it comes to my taxes."

Incumbent Supervisor Diane Dillon, unsurprisingly, doesn't share Chilton's assessment of the county's performance. She cites progress, however great or incremental, on the key issues, and defends the board's track record.

In neighborhoods on the east side of Yountville, Dillon is quick to point out that the county recently achieved the equivalent of a triple-A bond rating from Standard & Poor's. It's one of a handful of local governments in California to attain such a rating, which reflects the county and the board's fiscal prudence and strong management, Dillon said.

"It's kind of (like) getting an A-plus from your teacher," Dillon told a resident.

Dillon, a Democrat, points out to voters that she was raised in Napa, graduated from Napa High School and has lived in St. Helena for the past 30 years. She said that shows how she understands the entire valley, and works to govern with a broad perspective that traces its local roots to generations of local lineage — her ancestor helped build the Bale Grist Mill, for instance.

"I'm passionate about protecting this place," Dillon told another voter. "I feel like I have a good grasp of the issues countywide. Having good fiscal management is something I'm very proud of."

Chilton and Dillon spoke with the Napa Valley Register last week about how they'd work to tackle some of Napa County's most pressing issues.

The potential for new residential and commercial development in the community of Angwin has been a hot-button issue in the 3rd District race, as some residents are working to oppose Pacific Union College if it plans to sell land to a development company.

Chilton said the county has ignored this issue for far too long. The county general plan called for taking action on the development potential on some college-owned parcels after June 2010, but the board has yet to do so, he said.

"The Board of Supervisors has essentially abdicated its responsibilities for this issue over the last four years," Chilton said. "There's been a string of excuses. I don't consider the excuses valid."

Dillon said the board will be taking up the issue this summer. The county hired a new planning director, David Morrison, recently, and wants to give him time before delving into such a complex, controversial issue, she said.

She pushed for the supervisors to address it earlier this year, and favors restricting the development potential on the college land. More development doesn't reflect the surrounding land uses in Angwin, she said.

"We need to deal with this issue," Dillon said. "They just aren't simple answers. This is a reflection of what's on the ground."

Chilton said he wants to balance PUC's needs to bolster its financial future with the desire of some residents to stop future development. That's a tough task, he acknowledged, but he said he believes that the college selling land for vineyard development — but not residential development — could be a solution.

“The problem is Pacific Union College has been left in limbo for a long time,” Chilton said. “The people in Angwin have been in limbo. There needs to be a balanced solution.”

As any resident who has tried to get Upvalley on Highway 29 on a summer morning can attest, traffic continues to have a major impact on residents’ lives.

Dillon said more data is needed to quantify the source of the problem — whether it’s commuters from surrounding counties coming to work in Napa or the wine and hospitality industries, or attributable to throngs of visitors who flood in during the peak tourism months.

“We really need more objective data from the traffic study,” Dillon said. “Everybody has their own anecdotal version or personal opinion. It’s a reflection of our success.”

With that information, the county and cities could then work together to address the problem — either by trying to get money from the state and federal governments to fund highway improvements in the south county, or by trying to increase the number of affordable housing units to get more commuters off the road, she said.

“Transportation systems take a long time to plan and they take a long time to build because you have to find the money,” Dillon said.

Chilton also advocates a broadly focused solution among the jurisdictions; growth in American Canyon will affect traffic Upvalley, just as hotel, resort and winery development will have similar effects to the south, he said.

But he said highway improvement projects will have to be prioritized. A Caltrans project to build a flyover at the intersection of highways 221 and 29 has been included in a wish list of projects the Napa County Transportation and Planning Agency would like to see funded over the next 35 years.

Chilton questions the need for such an expensive project — early estimates said it could cost more than \$34 million — and he said there could be other, cheaper solutions to south county highway gridlock.

“Is that really a project that’s going to move the needle on traffic?” Chilton said. “The wish list of projects out there is not going to materialize. We have to sit down and say, ‘What can we realistically do that’s the best bang for the buck?’”

On maintaining the county road network, Chilton said he wants the board to spend more of its General Fund dollars, the main source of operating money for the county, on roads. The county plans to ramp up General Fund spending on roads to \$3.7 million by 2018, but Chilton said he wants to spend even more, as the road network needs it.

Affordable housing advocates have blamed the traffic woes on the county’s lack of affordable housing, although county officials have dismissed that. Dillon said affordable housing can be a

difficult issue because it requires heavy government subsidy to get built, and dollars from the state and federal government have been subject to heavy competition recently.

She noted that the Upvalley cities have had little to no interest in growing substantially in population, and it can be difficult to find good locations in the county that would suit affordable housing.

“Even if we find the place, how do we pay for it?” Dillon asked. “St. Helena and Calistoga are two towns that don’t want to grow that much. We need to have a discussion about it.”

Chilton criticized the county for doing what he calls the “minimum obligations” in its Housing Elements to provide affordable housing. The last Housing Element put affordable housing units in Angwin, Moskowite Corner and Spanish Flat, which Chilton said was done because the county had failed to work together with the cities.

The next Housing Element will put the units at the Napa Pipe project, and last spring the county struck a deal with the city of Napa to have it take on 80 percent of the county’s housing allocation until 2058 at least.

Chilton characterized the negotiations leading to the deal on Napa Pipe as the county working to dump its problem on the city, and said it needs to do more to respect the city’s wishes when it comes to the project’s future.

Napa Pipe will likely end up within city limits, and because of that Chilton said the county needs to back off and let the city plan it. He said the need to hire a mediator to work with city and county staff on some of the outstanding agreements related to Napa Pipe is a bad sign. He said he also believes the Napa County Planning Commission should turn the project’s design over to its city counterpart.

“They don’t want to be told by you, ‘Take our problem and we’re going to wash our hands clean,’” Chilton said. “The city of Napa is taking on a significant burden and they need to be treated as an equal partner.”

Dillon said the city and the county did eventually work together on Napa Pipe, and are working collaboratively currently.

“Napa Pipe is a land-use planning issue,” Dillon said. “We did work with the city on that. I believe they just wanted the property to be in the city. It’s a turf battle, not necessarily a land-use battle.”

Both candidates said they want to work closely with the wine industry and the county planning commissioners on the issue of winery development and expansions, which has raised alarm from some grapegrowers and environmental groups about groundwater usage and the county approving more wineries than its grape crop can sustain.

Dillon said she expects to address the issue jointly with the Planning Commission, but it's an issue too tough to handle in one meeting.

It will need long-term planning, leadership and collaboration to resolve.

"It's not a challenge that has a Tuesday morning, two-hour-hearing solution," Dillon said. "The challenge of being an elected official is that you have to balance all of these competing viewpoints."

Chilton said it requires extensive outreach to the industry and outside groups.

"As a supervisor, I would really want to work closely with all the stakeholders," Chilton said. "There should be a cause of concern from the industry itself. It's out there. It's plain for all to see. These are things that the industry and the county need to sit down and be open to talk about."

The county's three farmworker housing centers reside within the 3rd District, but will likely lose six weeks of operation this year due to the loss of \$100,000 in funding from Auction Napa Valley grants.

Dillon said the board needs to work with the wine industry to lobby state lawmakers in Sacramento to increase a \$10-per-planted-acre property tax assessment that grapegrowers pay for the centers' operation. The assessment can't be increased without the Legislature's approval, she said.

"That's probably what we should be doing, but I'd like to have a discussion with the industry first," Dillon said.

The county could also look at turning the centers' operations over to a nonprofit organization locally, Dillon said.

Chilton said he wouldn't blame the auction's organizers, the Napa Valley Vintners, for deciding to spend auction proceeds on issues other than housing. He said the farmworker center funding issue raises other important points about housing policies in the county, and how it works to supply housing.

"That's privately raised money," Chilton said. "I'm certainly not going to criticize a private organization for how they choose to spend their own money. We're creating some of the problems with our policies."

Dillon has strongly embraced a bill from U.S. Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena, to force the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to cede management of recreation at Lake Berryessa to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

The delays in redeveloping resorts at the lake have cut off the flow of tourists in the summer months — the lifeblood of the economy for lake residents and businesses — and Reclamation is to blame, Dillon said.

“We’ve got to bring business and tourism back to the lake,” Dillon said. “BLM has a different structure. It takes an act of Congress to change that.”

Chilton also faulted Reclamation, but worried that giving management to another federal agency would only result in more delays. He said the board needs to show more leadership on the issue, taking the problem to Reclamation officials in offices in Folsom, Denver and Washington, D.C.

“The speed and the urgency of the Bureau of Reclamation doesn’t meet the speed and urgency of the situation,” Chilton said. “It is a very dire situation out there. (Thompson’s bill) sounds great, but the Bureau of Land Management will without any doubt start over. My concern is that will really set Berryessa back even further.”

This story has been corrected to accurately reflect Dillon's understanding of the legislative process regarding vineyard assessments for farmworker housing.