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FEATURED

Seth Piccirillo discusses his early start to the 2019 mayoral race

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Seth Piccirillo

JAMES NEISS



He doesn't have an on-record opponent yet.

His current boss — the Mayor of Niagara Falls Paul Dyster — hasn't publicly disclosed his political plans for next year.

There's still nearly a full year between now and Election Day 2019.

None of that matters to Seth Piccirillo.

The city's director of community development and code enforcement has made it clear that, as far as he's concerned, the race to become the next mayor of the City of Niagara Falls has already started.

"I announced early because I think I need every one of these days to make it work," said Piccirillo.

At his request, three members of the Niagara Gazette editorial board — Regional News Director Mark Scheer, Managing Editor Matt Winterhalter and Publisher John Celestino — met this past week with Piccirillo inside the newspaper's Third Street office to discuss his campaign and plans for the mayor's office.

Here's an overview of some of the topics that were discussed:

THE DYSTER QUESTION

What's it like to announce a mayoral campaign run while working for a sitting mayor?

Piccirillo admits the conversation between him and Dyster, a longtime personal friend and political ally, wasn't easy.

He described Dyster as “surprised” when he broke the news to him, but said the move hasn’t impacted their working relationship. Since telling the mayor he decided to run for office, Piccirillo said the two have maintained a professional relationship and his political intentions have not come up during conversation.

“What I told him was I felt this was the time and I needed to do it,” Piccirillo said.

Dyster has said publicly that he’s still trying to decide whether he should seek another term. During a recent appearance on the “Viewpoint” talk radio show on WJLL AM 1440, Dyster said he planned to talk it over with his family during the holidays and make a decision sometime early next year.

Piccirillo made it clear that he’ll run against Dyster if it comes down to it because he believes he can be an effective mayor, and that is that.

“If he were to announce that he’s still running, I would still be running,” Piccirillo said.

AN EXTENSION OF DYSTER?

Piccirillo admits one of his bigger challenges in the coming year will be selling voters on the idea that he’s is not simply an extension of Dyster, a one-time member of the Falls city council and a three-term mayor who has held the top post in city government since 2008.

Dyster appointed Piccirillo as the city’s director of community development in March 2012. Prior to that, Piccirillo served as manager of government affairs for the Niagara Frontier Transportation Authority. He also served as legislative director under former state Assemblywoman, Democrat Francine Delmonte, from 2005 to 2008.

Piccirillo said that while he has a great deal of respect for Dyster and believes a lot of good has been done in the city under his leadership, he insists he has his own way of doing things and offers a different approach in some key areas.

“I think what I have to make clear is that I am my own person,” he said. “I have to show with actions that my administration would be mine and it would have differences.”

Chief among them is the approach to dealing with outside entities that have an impact on the city’s bottomline.

His reasons for starting the 2019 mayoral race so early have something to do with his views on the current state of affairs in the city as a whole.

Essentially, he believes there’s been too much waiting and not enough doing.

His prime example is the casino cash standoff with the Seneca Nation of Indians.

While Dyster has chosen to respect the arbitration process while supporting Democratic Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s position that the state and, by extension, the city, has firm footing in the arbitration process, Piccirillo believes the city should start talks with Seneca leaders directly in hopes of striking a separate compensation agreement that will provide revenue for the host community that it desperately needs.

“Our responsibility is to our budget,” Piccirillo said.

Piccirillo said he’s not confident, heading into the holiday season, that there will be a resolution in the arbitration process, which he believes puts an already financially challenged city in an even worse position heading into 2019.

“Waiting for arbitration, I don’t think, makes any sense,” he said.

Piccirillo said he has a similar view when it comes to other entities with significant interests in Niagara Falls, including New York State Parks and the New York Power Authority. He supports efforts by the grassroots group, Reform Niagara, and says both state parks and the power authority are earning significant revenue from the offerings in and around the city and should be expected to provide a greater return to the Falls.

“We have to stop settling on this mentality that we are just waiting for the state to help us all the time,” he said.

ANSWERING CRITICS

Piccirillo’s campaign announcement drew an almost immediate rebuke from the Niagara Reporter, formerly the Niagara Falls Reporter, the local tabloid newspaper owned by former One Niagara owner Frank Parlato.

The paper questioned a recent shift in Piccirillo’s job description from that of director of community development to that of director of community development and code enforcement, suggesting the move was made with Dyster’s blessing in an effort to skirt the Hatch Act. The set of federal guidelines bars employees who derive the bulk of their salaries from federal sources from seeking public office while maintaining their governmental position.

Parlato and the newspaper’s managing editor, local attorney Nick D’Angelo, question the timing behind the change in positions for Piccirillo.

“We find it hard to believe that Mr. Piccirillo did not know about the mayor’s intention to do this. Why would he need to switch the position he is paid from if there is no concern over the funds that are being used to fund the salary?” D’Angelo said in response to questions from the Gazette.

Parlato and D’Angelo have also suggested the matter has drawn interest from the U.S. Office of Special Counsel.

In response to questions from the Niagara Gazette, a spokesperson for the U.S. Office of Special Counsel, citing the office’s policy, said he “could not comment on or confirm any open or closed Hatch Act investigations.”

We maintain confidentiality throughout the process,” the spokesperson added. “Once an investigation is complete, a letter with the findings is provided to only the subject of the investigation and to the complainant.”

On his campaign website and during his interview with the Niagara Gazette, Piccirillo maintained that he has done nothing wrong and characterized reports in the Reporter about alleged Hatch Act violations as “inaccurate.”

While the 2012 Hatch Act amendment bars local government employees whose salaries are supported with 100 percent federal funds from running for office, Piccirillo says the Act does not cover employees like him whose salaries are not fully covered by federal funds.

In response to the Reporter stories, Piccirillo posted a video to his campaign website and Facebook page under the heading: “Correcting the Niagara Reporter on the Hatch Act.”

“I won’t be paying for any ads in the Reporter, so I don’t expect that they will tell you the truth about the Hatch Act, or how it relates to my employment with the city,” Piccirillo wrote in his rebuttal to the newspaper.

HOUSING MATTERS

While the city has enjoyed some progress in the form of new hotels and other developments in recent years, Piccirillo said, if elected, he’d push for more positive changes across city neighborhoods.

To do that, he said, the city must address several fundamental problems, at least one that he deals with on a regular basis.

Addressing housing issues and code violations in particular would be one of his top priorities if elected.

He said the city needs to continue to focus on putting properties seized by the city through foreclosure into the hands of responsible owners by supporting “home ownership” auctions over the traditional in rem process.

By establishing guidelines for redevelopment under the terms of purchase during home ownership auctions, Piccirillo said the city can better position itself to expect neglected properties that have languished in the tax foreclosure process to be restored and returned to the tax rolls.

Piccirillo has been critical of the current state of the city’s housing court and said he also intends to continue to push for what he views as a heightened sense of “urgency” where dealing with frequent and recurrent housing code violators are concerned.

TAXING PROBLEMS

In Piccirillo’s opinion, too many properties in the city are benefiting from tax break deals offered to companies and investors through a process that is largely out of the city’s control.

While the city has seen new developments in the form of new hotels and other multi-million-dollar developments, Piccirillo noted that payment-in-lieu-of-taxes agreements struck with the Niagara County Industrial Development Agency have, in several cases, curtailed the amount of tax revenue being garnered off those properties.

Moving forward, Piccirillo said he would not support tax breaks for new construction in the Falls and would only do so in instances where projects involve the redevelopment of existing, vacant structures in need of renovation.

He is also calling for a change in the city’s property tax valuation system to what he describes as a “land value tax” structure.

Under a land value tax system, taxes would be based on the appraised value of the land only, which Piccirillo believes would be better for city home and business owners who currently pay taxes based on a two-tier household and commercial valuation system.

The proposed change, which would require approval by the state, assigns value based on property size and location as opposed to the value of the homes or any structure on site.

In this way, Piccirillo argues that home and business owners would not be “punished” for improving their homes and buildings.

In addition, he believes the system would help address another one of the city’s lingering problems, that of land speculation.

On his campaign website, Piccirillo posted a video describing how he believes a land value tax system would impact large land owners in the city, specifically citing Niagara Falls Redevelopment, the company that acquired roughly 140 acres of largely undeveloped land in the downtown area in the late 1990s.

Piccirillo said that while NFR has a sizable chunk of “prime” real estate near downtown, the company demolished many of the structures on the land, which has ultimately reduced the firm’s costs in terms of local taxes paid over the years.

“The city’s tax structure actually helps NFR’s land speculation game,” Piccirillo said in a message posted to his campaign website.

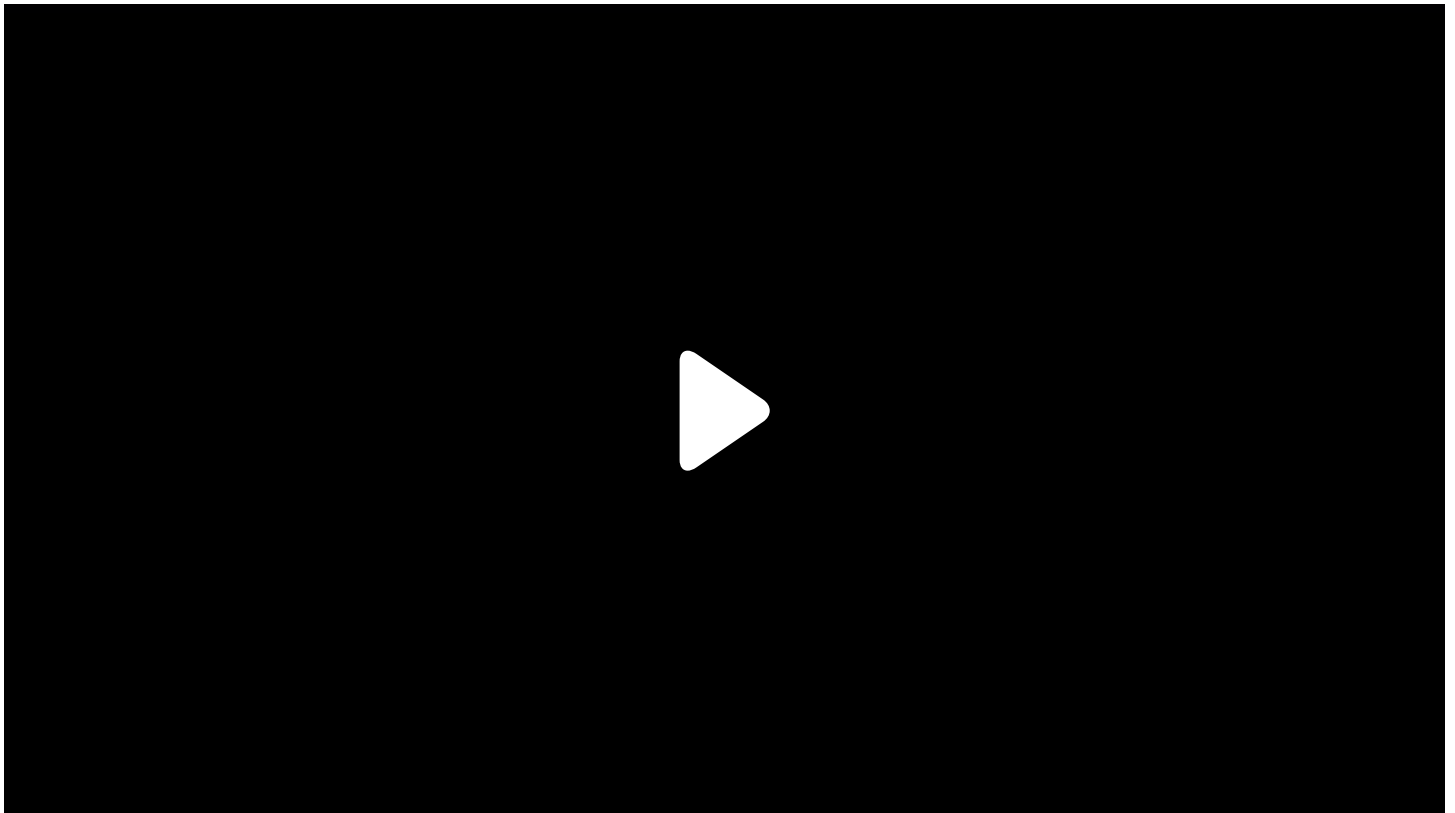
YOUTH MOVEMENT

At 36, the Falls native and father of two says he intends to focus at least part of his campaign on social media, a move that would allow him to push his message and vision to residents in his age bracket through Facebook posts, website videos and other modern means.

If he is elected next November, Piccirillo said he would continue to advocate for community based budgeting practices and programs that focus on improving the quality and attractiveness of city neighborhoods.

“The future of Niagara Falls, to be able to sustain itself, is neighborhoods that people want to live in,” he said.

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