

George 'Jody' Sweeney seeks 3rd term as Levy Court commissioner

By Ian Gronau

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George 'Jody' Sweeney

DOVER — After serving on the Kent County Levy Court for 8 years, Democrat George “Jody” Sweeney is seeking reelection. Mr. Sweeney first ran in 2007 during a special election called after Commissioner Donald Blakey vacated the office to move on to the state legislature.

According to Mr. Sweeney, he lost that election by 52 votes. After that he rededicated himself to the effort.

“I started coming to Levy Court every Tuesday night and sat in the audience and learned everything about the process,” he said. “I came back in 2008 and won that election by 58 percent to 42 percent. I feel confident about this year.”

Professionally, Mr. Sweeney said that he’s been in information technology for his whole life, spending 20 years with the state and then moving on to become the chief information officer at Wesley College.

During a question and answer session, Mr. Sweeney explained why he seeks to retain his seat on the Levy Court seat: Q: Why are you running for reelection?

A: “I have really enjoyed the opportunity to serve my county. Kent County is a victim of it’s own success, we make it so nice to live here that people flock to us. That’s why school districts like Smyrna are among the top in the state in growth over the past 10 years. Smyrna School District has grown 24% in the last 10 years. I am proud of my ability to help people in the county in little ways too. I get phone calls and emails all the time from people that have every type of problem from ‘my next door neighbor is burning garbage and the smell is floating into my house’ to ‘my neighbors grass is too long.’ I’m happy to have an opponent as well because it makes me work even harder. He came into the picture late in the process and was named as an opponent.

I’m not sure that he understands Levy Court, he hasn’t attended a single session as far as I am aware. You can’t just walk into this. If you do this job right, it’s an extra 30 to 35 hours per week. If he wins this seat and doesn’t represent the constituents well, I’ll be back in a few years to take it,”

Q: What important skills will you bring to the Levy Court?

A: “With information technology, you have to be forward thinking. You have to look outside the box for solutions to problems that the county might face. For instance, the idea to bring all of economic development to a division here in the county and stop giving the money to another group that we didn’t have full control over. We brought economic development as a division to Kent County and now we have better control over how that division works and how we can use it to spur the kinds of businesses we feel are going to be beneficial to the county. This has shown a lot of promise in things like the food court along Route 113, the expansion of the port at Dover Air Force Base and the DE Turf project in Frederica.”

Q: What issues facing Kent County need the attention of the Levy Court?

A: “Right now the biggest issue we face, or are going to face in the next few years is a state government that is wanting to start pushing down some of the expenses they cover onto the

counties. Kent County has taken all the possible steps to make sure that our government is lean. In the last 8 years we've gone from a nearly \$30 million a year budget and we dropped it down to a \$19 million per year budget. It has come up to about a \$22 and a half million per year budget in the last 2 to 3 years, but that's because the revenue is there for special projects like our parks. Now the state is running a deficit somewhere around \$160 million so they're going to be looking to offload some of their expenses. Some state legislators have been saying that in other states counties take care of schools and prison systems. Historically, we haven't done those things, and if they are considering passing us those type of expenses to us, it's going to be a tremendous burden.

"There will be no way to handle it without some sort of tax increase. We're fighting that. Our county administrator is on the committee that is addressing those issues. I'm fighting to keep them from doing it because I want to see the state do what Kent County did. We looked at every expense and every possible means of reducing costs first.

"This meant everything from not letting employees take their cars home to putting in automatic light systems that turn off lights after 30 minutes. It may not seem like much, but we were able to reduce our budget by almost 33 percent.

"In these situations it's not one or two big items that they need to cut, they need to be looking at hundreds of little things that will save them thousands apiece which will build up to savings in the millions."

Q: During your professional and public service career, what are the accomplishments of which you are most proud?

A: "I'm probably most proud of our gymnasium recreation center. Our park system is one of the best in the state and we expanded our parks by more than 52 acres by purchasing and partnering with the Del-Mar-Va Council Boy Scouts of America.

"We didn't just go out and buy land because we had money to throw away, we worked with the boy scouts to purchase the land. It's been on our books for nearly 20 years and its through my chairmanship of community services that we started moving that forward.

"That is also a partnership with the Dover Boys and Girls Clubs, without their help we wouldn't have been able to fund the whole thing by ourselves.

I'm also very pleased with our emergency responders. Our paramedic system is one of the best in the nation, they've received awards for what they do.

"They've reduced their response time over the past 10 years from 10 minutes down to 8 minutes and that's a big difference when you're trying to save peoples lives. (Mr. Sweeney's opinions on Kent County's emergency responders appeared in this paper as a letter to the editor on Oct. 10)

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