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## Air quality tops list of issues on environment

### Candidates tackle area problems during forum

By **SCOTT BARKER**, [barkers@knews.com](mailto:barkers@knews.com)  
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Five candidates for state office agreed at a forum Tuesday that the biggest environmental problem facing the Knoxville area is air quality, but others pointed to urban sprawl, illegal polluters and water quality as being top priorities.

The candidates answered questions on the environment at a forum sponsored by the Sierra Club at East Tennessee Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville.

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Though most named air quality as the top issue, the questions they had to answer dealt with a variety of problems, from citizen participation in the permitting process to transportation planning.

Christopher Oldham, the Democratic candidate in the 14th District House race, said uncontrolled growth spawns air pollution, water degradation and other ecological ills.

"Everything bad that I see happen seems to flow from this sprawl," Oldham said.

The two independent hopefuls in the 14th District race, Keith Downen and Kyle Phillips, would take different routes to tackling air quality issues. Downen said state government should fill its fleet with gas-electric hybrid vehicles and promote the use of propane-powered buses. Phillips said education would convince Tennesseans to make better environmental choices.

The Republican candidate for the 14th District, Park M. "Parkey" Strader, didn't attend the forum.

State Senate candidate Cindy McGill, a Democrat running in the 6th District, said her top priority would be to do more to stop big polluters, citing the Coster Shop dumping controversy in the Burnett Creek community and the multimillion-dollar cleanup of the contaminated Witherspoon Inc. industrial sites in Vestal.

"I want strict fines and penalties for people who are polluting in South Knoxville," she said.

McGill's opponent, Republican state Rep. Jamie Hagood, did not attend.

Republican House candidate Randall Parker, who's running in the 13th District, cautioned against burdensome regulations to combat sprawl.

"Things just grow," Parker said. "They do. I have a very hard time with

government telling us what to do with our land."

The 13th District incumbent, Democrat Billy Tindell, said state officials should buy land, not regulate construction, to defend against sprawl.

"The government's role is preservation," Tindell said.

Frank Niceley, a Republican running for the 17th District House seat, said the state should help reduce vehicle emissions by mandating the use of methanol. The former two-term legislator also said lobbyists should not serve on state boards and commissions.

The Democratic candidate in the 17th District, Hank Barnett, said he would work to protect water quality through building regulations and restrictions on clear-cutting.

"Quality of life follows water quality," the former park ranger said. "It's the biggest problem we've got."

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