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Finalists for County Job Meet the Public

Peter Guinta

WORLD GOLF VILLAGE -- Five finalists for St. Johns County administrator talked, ate and schmoozed for two hours Thursday night with more than 100 local officials and county residents at the World Golf Hall of Fame.

The bottom line opinion seemed to be pretty universal: Any one of these men, people said, would make a great administrator.

The entire County Commission attended along with many county staffers, as well as representatives of the building industry, social service agencies and the Chamber of Commerce, among other constituencies.

The candidates -- Keith Chadwell of Atlanta, Frank W. Clifton Jr. of Onslow County, N.C., Patrick D. Salerno of Sunrise, Michael David Wanchick of Richardson, Texas, and Michael J. Wright of Tallahassee -- gave a voice and face to people who only knew them before as names on a list.

District 5 County Commissioner James Bryant said the Colin Baenziger & Associates, the search firm that chose the candidates, did a "very professional job."

Baenziger identified 54 names, then whittled that down to 12 who seemed to fit St. Johns County best. The commission chose five from the list, using only their applications as criteria.

"They went the extra mile," Bryant said of the firm. "We're going to see in the future a devolution by the state and federal government, especially in health care and social services. We're going to need someone who can deal with that."

Commissioner Cyndi Stevenson of District 1 said that this was a chance for everyone to view all the candidates in a social setting. "We have a good group," she said. "This is a tough job."

Chairman Ben Rich introduced them, praising World Golf Village for the first-class accommodations.

"This is an important night for everyone here," he told the candidates. "And certainly for each one of you. I believe each of you are capable of leading this county into the next decade."

Building industry representative Ed Paucek said he'd only read their applications and met three of the candidates. "But I like what I see," he said. "The process has been open and non-political and fair. That's commendable.

"Whoever gets the job will probably have to proceed cautiously and prudently. What the business community needs is continuity from a calm, methodical individual."

Switzerland resident Donna Braasch, a St. Johns County native, said she came "just to get a look at the candidates. I'm particularly interested in growth and transportation. It would be interesting to know who they are."

Few of the candidates could be cornered to talk.

Chadwell, however, said he was amazed at the size of the county and its diversity, and he saw the divergence between preservation and development.

"I imagine this community will have a huge conversation over this issue," he said.

All the candidates will be in private interviews with the county commissioners this morning, except for those talking to Vice Chairman Tom Manuel in Conference Room B. Those will be open to the public starting at 8:45 a.m.

The full commission plans to question each one separately starting at 1 p.m., and that also will be open to the public and televised by Government TV.