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Editorial: Johnston, Salazar and Luke the best choices for Salt Lake City Council

Johnston, Salazar and Luke.

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Three of the seven positions on the Salt Lake City Council are up for election in the balloting that began with mail ballots arriving this week and closes Nov. 3. Two of them, with the retirement of incumbents, are open seats.

Elections for council members don't draw the same amount of attention, money — or, this year, acrimony — as the contest for mayor. But choosing council members is crucial nonetheless. The members pass laws, make policy, set tax rates and spending levels and, at least in theory, speak for their districts in the halls of power.

All six candidates in this year's election have much to recommend them. All would serve their constituents well. But only one per district can be chosen. Having spoken to all of them and reviewed their positions on the issues, the editorial board endorses these candidates:

District 2 • Andrew Johnston

District 2 is a contest between new and old guards. With incumbent Kyle LaMalfa giving up his seat, the race has drawn former City Councilman Van Turner for his fifth council race, this time against newcomer Andrew Johnston.

It is understatement to say that Turner has deep roots in the west-side district. He literally has never left one corner of Glendale and still owns the house he grew up in. He is also a small businessman, operating a cafe and floral shop that keeps him plugged in with residents. He supports multimodal “complete streets,” but he opposes the Prop. 1 transit tax. He questions whether the city can afford “fun stuff” like bonding for parks.

Johnston, a social worker in Intermountain Healthcare's Dayspring program, also is a strong neighborhood advocate and part of a new wave of residents who are willing

to take on the area's historic problems with crime and poverty because they see a pleasant, convenient and affordable community close to downtown. He shares Turner's concerns that their district should not have to carry the affordable-housing load.

Johnston gets the nod because of his forward-thinking approach to larger city issues. Turner views the job almost exclusively through the prism of his own neighborhood. Johnston brings knowledge and fresh perspective on issues like economic development and homelessness. (He opposes the police hiring eight social workers who he says compete with existing services.) And, while he believes the city should close Rose Park golf course instead of Glendale, he recognizes that city residents' recreation interests have evolved and investment in parks and open space is needed.

District 4 • Nate Salazar

The contest for this seat, which came open when Councilman Luke Garrott launched his quixotic bid for the mayor's office, is an extremely close call. Both Derek Kitchen and Nate Salazar are concerned, energetic, well-spoken and committed to their neighborhoods and their city. However the balloting comes out, the residents of this central city district will win.

Salazar earns the nod, though, for two key reasons. One is the fact that he has put his emphasis strongly on the need for the city to stand up for the less fortunate and those struggling to achieve the American dream, including the homeless and, especially, the children in the city's underfunded schools. He has already worked toward those goals, both as political activist and in his career as a social worker, now doing outreach to low-income families through their elementary school. And, face it, a city as ethnically diverse as this one should have at least one Latino voice on its City Council.

Kitchen is a self-made businessman and friendly fixture at local farmers markets. He is already destined to have his name in the history books as lead plaintiff in the federal lawsuit that brought marriage equality to Utah. His campaign's emphasis on business development is commendable. He has also done more than his share of volunteer work and is on the right side of the same issues that Salazar stresses.

But, by electing Salazar, District 4 voters would send the message that entrepreneurs, important as they are to any city's future, aren't the ones most in need of a voice.

District 6 • Charlie Luke

During his one term in office, Charlie Luke has worked hard — with varying degrees of success — to call the city's administration to account on issues as varied as the need for a citywide transportation plan, a shortage of police officers in neighborhoods other than downtown and a failure to focus attention and funds on nuts-and-bolts maintenance issues that the city is falling behind on.

Luke's day jobs include a multistate political consulting operation and serving as executive director of a statewide association of providers of day and residential services for people with disabilities. The job he has done for his council constituents plays on the same skills, insisting on plans for such things as transit and open space before decisions are made and seeking out grants to fund public services.

Luke, the only council incumbent on the ballot this year, is challenged by Tracey Harty. An independent marketing and communications consultant, Harty cut her political teeth as an activist working on historic preservation and transit issues in her neighborhood. Like the incumbent, she is rightly concerned about public safety, sustainability and orderly economic development. She would be an asset to the council and would help make up for a glaring shortage of women in public office.

Still, the voters in his east-side district would be well advised to keep Luke, his experience and his running start on the council for another four years.

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