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No love lost in Democratic sheriff race

Bad blood arises between
McMahon and Causey

By Adam Wagner
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Ed McMahon and Sid Causey – candidates for the Democratic nomination for New Hanover County sheriff in the May 6 primary – were supposed to answer the question with one word apiece.

"This used to be obviously a close relationship, professionally, personally. It clearly is not anymore. Whoever doesn't win, can you endorse the other candidate?" Kevin Wuzzardo, WWAY NewsChannel 3's political editor, said at the end of Tuesday's televised debate.

Neither McMahon, the sitting sheriff nor Causey, the former sheriff whose retirement paved the way for McMahon's ascension, could keep his answer to a single word.

"Absolutely I would never endorse him if he was the only one running," Causey said, forming his words almost before Wuzzardo finished speaking.

See DEMOCRATIC | 4A

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DEMOCRATIC

Continued from 1A

"I could not," McMahon said. "I could not endorse Mr. Causey."

The debate had been indicative of the campaign, starting out relatively civil and heating up as Causey leveled accusation after accusation at McMahon.

Among them were claims of favoritism, low morale among deputies, mismanagement of the sheriff's office budget and telling mis-truths about the number of school resource officers in New Hanover County.

"There's days that I'm sick to my stomach," Causey said Friday. "He's a disgrace to the office of sheriff."

If re-elected, Causey added, he would restore morale at the sheriff's office by giving raises more fairly than his successor has.

McMahon, though, says the sheriff's office does not have a morale problem and that he's given raises fairly. As proof of the former, he points to the department's turnover rate, which was 10.94 percent in 2009, stayed about even in 2010 at 10.65 percent, then fell to 6.94 percent in 2011 before being 8.89 percent in 2012 and 7.52 percent in 2013.

"If you have less people leaving, it's an indicator to me there's not some kind of mass exodus leaving, so morale can't be that low," McMahon said, adding that he meets with each department twice a year and meets randomly each week with department employees by drawing names out of fish bowls in the corner of his office.

Causey has also been adamant that a grant applied for and received by New Hanover County Schools to pay

for 11 additional school resource officers – bringing the total number of deputies in schools to 34 – isn't enough to keep kids safe long term particularly because a grant expires.

"That's just a Band-Aid," he said Friday, adding he'd told McMahon prior to leaving office that schools were a soft target for violent crimes and that there should be an officer in every school.

McMahon, though, said he plans to keep the officers paid for under the grant for the long term and that he along with the school district's superintendent office have worked out a safety plan that works for both under their respective budgets.

"Grants help you with the initial shock of the equipment and of the manpower and then you start planning in your budget by the time it runs out to be able to keep it going," McMahon said.

Four school resource officers from the Wilmington Police Department and one from the Carolina Beach Police Department are, the sheriff said, an example of the department's ability to form partnerships with other agencies under his watch.

While the race focuses on issues such as school safety and department morale, the conflict between candidates remains apparent.

At the end of Tuesday's debate, after the cameras turned off, McMahon and Causey exchanged more words before the sitting sheriff offered his hand.

Causey turned away in anger until a WWAY employee prompted him to "shake the man's hand."

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