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House candidates talk about their goals for South Carolina

The SC House District 63 Special Election primary will be held on Tuesday, Feb. 24. Seeking the Republican nomination are Robby Hill, Elijah Jones and Jay Jordan.

If needed, a run-off will be on Tuesday, March 10, and the election will be held on Tuesday, April 14.

The News Journal asked the candidates to respond to a brief survey asking about their qualifications, goals for South Carolina and if elected what will be their main focus.

Robby Hill and Elijah Jones' answers follow. Candidate Jay Jordan did not respond to our survey.

Robby Hill

I believe my proven experience both in the public and private sectors is what makes me the most qualified candidate. I graduated from West Florence High and at 17 started my information technology company, HillSouth, right here in the district. Though starting a business at



ROBBY HILL

such a young age was at many times very difficult, through hard work, determination, and most importantly, the support of this community, it has become a success.

Growing up my parents instilled in me the values of hard work, giving back to the community, the importance of family, and faith in God. I think I am a very lucky man to be able to serve my God, my



ELIJAH JONES

neighbors, and the community that I love on Council.

I am the only candidate in this race to have ever served in office and have a proven track record. One of many projects I can point to is our business incubator downtown that has given local start-up businesses the chance to survive and thrive. It is this kind of leadership that I will bring to the State House. Moreover, I





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have had the opportunity to work with community leaders to create the public-private partnerships that are quickly revitalizing our city center. The voters know exactly the kind of solution-oriented leadership they can expect from me in Columbia and I will work hard every day to produce results for this district and for South Carolina.

Goals

My goal is to make Florence an even better place to live, work, and raise a family. If elected, my goal is to be an ally to Gov. Haley and Sen. Leatherman so we can continue bringing new jobs to South Carolina and improve our state.

Beyond just tackling important issues like education, job creation, and government reform, I also want to work on other issues that I believe will improve the lives of all who live in this district.

For example, criminal domestic violence. Unfortu-

nately, South Carolina is one of the most deadly states for women to live. I believe there is an important need to reform our CDV laws in South Carolina. Our current state laws place the emphasis on the number of times someone has been convicted, which my friends in law enforcement tell me is actually difficult to do in the first place, rather than the severity of the crime. A charge of criminal domestic violence carries a maximum sentence of 30 days in jail no matter the severity of the abuse. I will work to change this and make sure we are providing victims with every resource and assistance we can.

My ultimate goal is to make sure I am accessible to my constituents and responsive to their needs. I want to be a strong voice for Florence in Columbia by tackling any and all the issues that I am

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asked to and by working to improve the quality of life for this community whenever possible. An election is essentially a job interview and if elected, I work for you. I will always look out for my constituents and the people of South Carolina and will not be governed by special interests.

Main focus

Education, job creation, and infrastructure must be our top priorities and it starts with education. On the campaign trail I have talked to many people who voiced concerns that students are not being getting the education they deserve. We have to tackle these issues with a bold vision.

We have made strides in education like saying no to Common Core and passing Governor Haley's landmark education reform, but we must do more. We need to individualize learning for our children. I want to focus on creating regional career centers, apprenticeships, and teaching the soft skills that our students need to succeed in whatever they choose to do after graduation - whether that be pursuing college or a career.

The South Carolina Supreme Court has declared we are providing less than a "minimally adequate" education for our children and this is unacceptable. Our decades old funding formula is broken and we have not fully funded our legally required per-student cost since 2008. We need to look deeply into funding process, cut wasteful spending and maximize taxpayers money so our children are prepared for a 21st century

economy.

Elijah Jones

My home and office are located in SC House District 63, and this area of Florence County has been home for the majority of my life. I am a small business owner of several companies, the primary one being SonShine Management Sys-

tems Inc., a residential property management firm servicing properties within Florence County. My parents instilled a great work ethic in me from a young age as I worked with my father building apartments, grew up on a farm in Timmonsville, and began working in an office work environment as soon as I received my driver's permit. In 2007, I started SonShine and have grown it to one of the largest property and community management companies in our area. I have the unique perspective of working with condos and homeowners associations in Florence County also. Presently, we manage 30 organizations and I work with each to propose capital and operational budgets, implement the budgets, and levy and collect assessments. Each organization is like a small government. We budget for our needs and we tax (through assessments). I understand that each dollar contributed in assessments is hard earned money from the residents and do all I can to keep assessments as low as possible while preparing for the future. I believe I can take this perspective to Columbia and work hard for this district to keep government efficient and taxes low.

Goals

Anyone who has kept track of issues at the state level knows we have a lot of work to do in the areas of transportation, ethics and education. I hope I can take a business approach to Columbia and work to bring out of the box ideas to solve some of the major challenges we face in our State. I am proud to be a native of South Carolina and know that the public deserves to have their voice heard on these important issues. One goal I have is to maintain the open communication between the District and their representative that I've begun during this campaign. I think sometimes individ-

uals get involved in politics, and they lose connection with the individuals who gave them such

individuals who gave them such a great opportunity. While working hard to address the major issues in our state, one of my goals is always keep the lines of communication open with constituents and leaders in the district. In the spirit of maintaining that goal, you can reach me at 843-992-7664 or at elijah@jonesforschouse.com

My focus will be on economic development for the district and the state of South Carolina. In order to recruit investors to our state to bring new industry and job opportunities, we have to have a viable transportation system to include

roads and infrastructure that is reliable for our residents and is also maintained properly. In addition, another component of economic development is our educational system, which has been under scrutiny for as long as I can remember.

We must support our educators and give additional educational choices to parents and students. Through school choice, I believe our education system as a whole will be improved. The goal of any state should be to have a great workforce of students graduating each year who are able to jump right into the workforce and support those who have chosen to invest in South Carolina.

Finally, we must have strong ethics in state leadership if we are to recruit new investment in our state. If legislators and other elected officials are distrusted by the citizens of the state because of their past display of poor choices, how could we know for sure that the elected official is truly working for the state versus their own wallet? Economic development is the lifeblood of any government and in order to stay competitive with surrounding states, I believe retuning our focus to economic development in South Carolina will allow us to address all the issues that so desperately need our attention here in District 63 and in South Carolina as a whole.

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148 Road woes

Federal money loss small part of state's funding dilemma

The Associated Press

COLUMBIA — The amount of money South Carolina gets from the federal government for roads has dropped since 2008, but that is only a small part of the funding problems for a crumbling highway system.

Figures compiled by The Associated Press show the total amount of money the state has received from the Federal High-

way Trust Fund highway bridge funding. 9A
dropped by nearly \$43 million, or more than 6 percent, during the five-year period ending in 2013, the latest year for which numbers were available.

Lawmakers trying to figure out how to get more money toward roads said that is still a significant amount — enough to maybe add an extra lane to 15 or 20 miles of interstate or repave a lot of secondary roads.

But there were bigger problems. Road funding has never matched the state's growth with a gas tax that remained unchanged for nearly 30 years while road construction prices have risen considerably and vehicles are burning a lot less fuel.

The management of the Department of Transportation has come under fire too for relying on political pressure instead of objective rankings to decide what gets built and repaved and what doesn't.

South Carolina was the tenth-fastest growing state in population over the past decade, and road spending went up 28 per-

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Woes

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cent in that time. But 32 other states increased road funding at higher rates from 2003 to 2013.

Lawmakers have promised to do something to get more money to roads this session as business leaders have increased pressure by warning that South Carolina's economic growth could slow down if congestion increases while the condition of the highways decreases.

"South Carolina has

enjoyed unprecedented growth. We just haven't kept up with the infrastructure," said Rock Hill Republican Rep. Gary Simrill, who was put in charge of the House's efforts to improve highway funding.

The House is grappling with two ideas. Simrill was in charge of a committee that met for months in 2014, coming up with a

proposal to lower the gas tax, which is paid by retailers, while raising the sales tax on fuel, which is paid by wholesalers when they buy in bulk. That combined with other revenue

would raise an additional \$400 million for roads.



Haley

A proposal by Gov. Nikki Haley would raise the state's gas tax by 10 cents.

But she has said she will only support it if lawmakers pass a reduction in state income-tax rates over 10 years that would roughly match the gas-tax increase.

Simrill's and Haley's proposals have been introduced in the House, and

Simrill hopes the House can get back to talking about them by the end of the month.

Meanwhile, the Senate may have different ideas.

While the governor and House have focused on the \$400 million that DOT Director Janet Oakley says is enough to keep roads in their current condition, some senators think that's not enough.

The DOT has said it would take \$1.5 billion extra a year to get the all the state's roads to good condition by 2040.

"Does this Senate want

to put a Band-Aid on it, or fix the problem?" asked Sen. Ray Cleary, R-Murrells Inlet, who has led his chamber's efforts to solve the problem.

Earlier this month, Cleary held a Senate committee's first hearings on what to do about roads.

There are a number of related bills in the Senate, with solutions ranging from tolling Interstate 95 at the bridge over Lake Marion to borrowing money to expand interstates to figuring out a way to raise the gas tax, but only charge out-of-state residents.



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The Herald, Rock Hill, on DSS

We think Gov. Nikki Haley's pick to lead the state's Department of Social Services has the right idea in proposing a comprehensive review of operations at every DSS office in the state. But, if approved by the Legislature, she should act right away to address some pressing problems that already are well documented.

In one of what are likely to be several confirmation hearings, Susan Alford said she wants to visit each county, assess its needs and hear why caseworkers leave the agency. She told the Senate General Committee that caseload problems are closely associated to turnover, and she plans to address both by using her experience to probe the department's "ground game" at the county level.

During the daylong county meetings, Alford said she would meet with local law enforcement, solicitors, guardians and caseworkers. She especially hopes to get a sense of how each of the state's 46 counties is handling its responsibilities to care for children.

Alford, 60, appears to have the experience to tackle the job. She has been director of The Girls Center at Clemson University since 2007, a research hub for issues such as teen pregnancy and poor self-esteem. She also worked at the Department of Juvenile Justice for more than 12 years in various director roles and served as director of the state's probation and parole agency.

Alford would replace Lillian Koller, who resigned last year amid calls for her head from members of both parties. Haley was slow in realizing that Koller was in real trouble, attributing the criticism to election-year politics, but Koller resigned a day before the Senate was due to take up a no-confidence vote on her leadership.

Alford said making substantive changes at DSS could take years. She warned lawmakers not to start criticizing the agency if they don't see drastic improvements in the next year or two.

Certainly the agency's operation deserves an in-depth evaluation such as this. Alford no doubt is on the right track in trying to get at the root causes of high turnover rates. Once she's identified why so many people leave the agency, she can begin to seek sensible remedies.

But Alford does not have to start from scratch on this effort. The Senate already has produced an improvement plan after a year's worth of bipartisan hearings investigating child deaths, excessive caseloads and turnover.

Among other things, the plan, released in October, calls for adding 221 child welfare positions this fiscal year.

Many of the agency's problems, especially regarding child welfare, have been common knowledge for years, in fact, decades. A federal class action lawsuit was filed Jan. 12 against Haley and DSS, saying a lack of health care and other basic services is endangering children in the system.

The complaint alleges Haley and DSS are responsible for drastic foster home shortages, too many caseloads for workers and a failure to provide children with basic health care. The lawsuit also alleges that child maltreatment while in foster care is not adequately investigated, and inaccurate data masks a much higher rate of abuse and neglect than the state reports to the federal government.

Whatever the outcome of the lawsuit, it raises red flags. And in light of the seriousness of the allegations, action should be taken right away.

We hope Alford, if approved for the job, will find a reasonable balance between thoroughly investigating the agency's operations while also acting quickly to ensure that children in the system now are being well cared for. Children who aren't getting proper care can't afford to wait years for a change.