

Plaskett Outclasses Opponents at WTJX Congressional Forum

Incumbent Stacey Plaskett's grasp of legislative matters and extensive record set her apart during WTJX's candidate forum. In contrast, Ida Smith and Ronald Picard offered vague proposals, leaving voters questioning their readiness for the role

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Janeke Simon **October 22, 2024**

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I2r: Ida Smith, Delegate Stacey Plaskett, and Ronald Pickard.

On Monday evening, public broadcaster WTJX hosted the territory's congressional hopefuls at a forum for candidates seeking election as the delegate to the House of Representatives.

At the table was Ida Smith, whose independent candidacy is currently being challenged in court by the Supervisor of Elections. Joining her was Republican candidate Ronald Pickard, and

incumbent Stacy Plaskett, the Democratic candidate running for re-election.

Forum host Gwen-Marie Moolenaar, president of the League of Women Voters of the Virgin Islands, began the questioning by asking the candidates about what in their background has prepared them for the position. Ms. Smith emphasized the over 20 years she has spent conducting research into various issues affecting the territory, including trying to ensure that the National Park Service “does not encroach on our boundaries.” According to Ms. Smith, “they're claiming to own our properties here in these islands, and the treaty, as well as the federal laws, protect us against that.”

Mr. Pickard answered the question by referencing his background as a former law enforcement officer. He also spoke of his work as an activist. “I was there when the teachers went on strike, the union Steelworkers of America, the police department, the nurses...I've been there with them, I've been there with the struggle.” Mr. Pickard also touted his bipartisanship, which he said would result in a smoother path forward for the Virgin Islands in Congress.

Ms. Plaskett, meanwhile, touted her long history in Congress, beginning with her post-college work “as a staffer on the Hill for both Republican members of Congress, as well as for Democrats.” She spoke of her time as a prosecutor, as well as her extensive volunteer work with many local organizations. Ms. Plaskett pointed to her legislative record, which she says includes “having over 100 provisions” supporting the Virgin Islands “that I initiated that are now law.” She also specifically highlighted her work in helping ensure that the Department of Justice no longer relies on the racist jurisprudence embodied by the Insular Cases.

As the incumbent, it was perhaps expected that Ms. Plaskett would be called upon by the other candidates to defend her record, which she did robustly throughout the evening. Responding to a claim by Mr. Pickard that only one piece of legislation sponsored by Ms. Plaskett has become law during her tenure, the sitting Congresswoman referenced the cult classic movie “Schoolhouse Rock” to explain how several legislative amendments beneficial to the Virgin Islands and initiated by her have been included in various pieces of legislation signed into law over the years.

Later on in the discussion, Mr. Pickard returned to the issue of bipartisanship, sharply criticizing Ms. Plaskett over her behavior in Congress. “She's constantly attacked the Republican party. She's used all kinds of names to accuse everyone of being a racist, and she wonders why she can't get a bill passed,” he said, referring to the difficulties experienced in passing legislation to permanently increase the rum cover rate. “Had she established a professional relationship...and stopped attacking a particular party in Congress, she could have gone much more further,” Mr. Pickard declared.

Delegate Plaskett responded by pointing out that the Heritage Foundation, referenced to by Ms. Smith as trying to advance legislation harmful to the interests of the Virgin Islands, is a conservative organization run by members of the same party Mr. Pickard represents. “One of the candidates in this race is a member of the Republican party who is trying to take away a lot of our rights,” she declared.

The candidates agreed on the necessity of implementing fair work requirements for federal welfare programs, although they differed on how stringent these requirements should be. They also agreed on the necessity of preserving and protecting Social Security benefits for future generations of Virgin Islanders. They spoke of the necessity for citizens to participate in the electoral process, and acknowledged falling voter participation numbers as an issue to be addressed.

Asked about the key issues facing the Virgin Islands and which ones they would seek to address as a priority, Delegate Plaskett chose to focus on her legislative record, pointing to \$6 billion in the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 that was earmarked to work on energy and water projects for the territory. She also spoke to the half a billion dollars received as part of pandemic relief efforts. “I’m grateful for that, but there’s still so much work to be done,” Ms. Plaskett acknowledged, speaking of future legislative efforts to shore up the Social Security benefits coming to resident Virgin Islanders.

For her part, Ms. Smith said that she would focus on bringing more sustainable energy options to the territory. She would also focus on improving education. “I would definitely work on bills that would make sure that the education system in the Virgin Islands is the top.” According to Mr. Pickard, oversight would be his main priority. “It’s imperative we conduct what’s called a forensic audit,” he said, implying that such has “never been done before in modern history.” Ms. Plaskett, however, remarked that “the job of a member of Congress is not, in fact, to be that oversight person over money” once it is sent to the territory.

However, Mr. Pickard insisted that there was a role for the Congressional Delegate when it came to oversight. “We all witness for a fact that millions of dollars have been brought down from Congress here in the Virgin Islands, but then it disappears,” he insisted. “So if I’m going to bring money down here for my people here in the Virgin Islands, it’s highly imperative that I follow that money...I make sure I hold every single person accountable for every penny of that money that comes down to the Virgin Islands.”

In their closing appeal to voters, Mr. Pickard vowed to address “topics that’s really affecting us,” including the high costs of energy and food. For Ms. Plaskett, housing was a pressing issue. She telegraphed her displeasure with local government deciding to spend millions in community development grant funds to settle the Water and Power Authority’s debt to Vitol, and expressed hope that there will be more funding to support housing in the next Congress. For her part, Ms. Smith highlighted mental health in the territory, tying it in with the issue of housing. Solving homelessness in the territory, she argued, would also improve the mental health picture.

Plaskett’s deep understanding of legislative issues and her extensive experience as a ten-year incumbent set her apart from the challengers. While Plaskett offered detailed insights on a range of topics, opponents Ida Smith and Ronald Pickard struggled to move beyond broad statements and vague proposals. Their lack of specific knowledge left them unable to effectively counter Plaskett’s points, making them appear unprepared for the level of discourse expected in the race. Following the debate, Plaskett [took to Facebook](#), remarking, “I guess they (my opponents) won’t ask for a debate again.”

Apart from providing congressional hopefuls with the opportunity to discuss and debate issues relevant to the voting public, WTJX has hosted or will host similar forums with candidates for the 36th Legislature, the upcoming Constitutional Convention, and the boards of Election and Education.