

Fact-checking the county executive race

By Bethany Rodgers News-Post Staff | Posted: Monday, August 25, 2014 2:00 am

The first race for Frederick County executive is bound to feature some truths, half-truths and outright lies.

The matchup between Democrat Jan Gardner and Republican Blaine Young involves two prominent figures with starkly different viewpoints. And to support their opinions, the candidates have each assembled an arsenal of facts and figures, many of which stand in complete contradiction to each other.

To cut through some of the potential confusion, The Frederick News-Post will be fact-checking statements made by candidates and seeing whether they strike a bullseye, fly far from the mark or land somewhere in between.

The first fact-check article will review one of Young's campaign fliers. The top portion of the literature makes the case that Young has worked as a commissioner on "fixing what is broken in county government." The bottom half takes aim at Gardner.

Here's the claim: Gardner "increased spending by 11 percent every year, repeatedly raised taxes on families, supported the rain tax, supports the liberal policies of Barack Obama and Martin O'Malley."

Young's flier makes four separate allegations about Gardner's record, and some of them are more true than others. So we took a look at each of them individually.

"Increased spending by 11 percent every year" – Way off target

A glance at county budget documents suffices to debunk the statement that Gardner increased county spending by 11 percent each year. In fact, the county's operating budget decreased by more than \$33.8 million (or roughly 7 percent) from fiscal 2008 to fiscal 2011, over the period of time Gardner was commissioners president.

That's not to say that the budget didn't grow across all 12 years that Gardner served in office; spending went up by about 82 percent, rising from \$241.1 million in fiscal 2000 to \$438.3 million in fiscal 2011. But the year-to-year expenditure increases only equaled or topped 11 percent for three of the spending plans that Gardner worked on.

Young says he arrived at the 11 percent number by finding the difference between Gardner's largest and smallest budgets and dividing that across the nine years separating the two fiscal plans.

But this seems less like a fair assessment and more like a numbers game.

“That’s not how any normal person would do math,” Gardner said.

“Repeatedly raised taxes on families” – Bullseye

This assertion does stand up better to scrutiny. In 2000, Gardner joined other commissioners in approving a medley of tax increases, hiking property tax rates by 24 cents and raising income tax rates from 50 to 58 percent. The commissioners also raised fire taxes in many parts of the county. At the time, Gardner insisted on a \$25 tax credit to lessen the impact of the increases on county residents.

Gardner was also on board for the 2001 creation of an excise tax imposed on new construction to generate money for road improvements. It’s debatable whether that counts as a tax on Frederick County’s families since developers are the ones who have to pay up. Young contends that the tax gets passed on to homebuyers; Gardner says this may or may not be case but that the excise tax makes sure development pays its way so existing county residents don’t have to bear the burden.

In 2003, Gardner and two other commissioners again raised the fire tax. In 2004, she joined fellow board members in establishing a tax on hotel stays, though this is often considered a levy on visitors to the county and not local families.

To be fair, Gardner has also supported tax relief measure over the years, including a 2005 package that offered residents a \$100 credit on their property taxes. And in 2006, she voted to lower fire tax rates in urban districts.

Gardner also notes that Young raised property taxes on some county residents last year when he consolidated the fire tax fund into the county’s general fund.

“Supported the rain tax” – Way off target

There are several things problematic with saying Gardner supported the stormwater fee, dubbed the “rain tax” by its opponents. First of all, the stormwater fee requirement was born in the Maryland State House, not in Winchester Hall. The Legislature in 2012 passed a bill requiring the state’s 10 largest jurisdictions, including Frederick County, to establish the fee to fund water quality projects.

The county’s involvement was in setting the state-required fee. In 2013, sitting commissioners, who objected to the mandate, levied a nominal fee of 1 cent per property to stay in technical compliance with the law. Gardner was well out of office by the time all of this happened.

In an interview, Young wasn’t able to identify any specific statements by Gardner supporting the rain tax but said he hasn’t heard her speak against it.

“Her silence speaks volumes,” he said.

But his flier implies that she acted in support of the stormwater fee, and that’s simply not the case.

“Supports the liberal policies of Barack Obama and Martin O’Malley” – Misses the mark

Young uses a somewhat similar argument to defend his statement that Gardner backs the liberal policies of Barack Obama and Martin O’Malley. Gardner has supported these Democrats, and if she disagrees with particular initiatives, she should say so, he contends.

State elections records show Gardner has made campaign contributions to O’Malley. Young has also been widely disseminating a picture from a campaign rally where Gardner, the governor and Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown raised joined hands in a triumphant gesture.

Gardner says she’s a Democrat, so of course she has backed fellow party members in their campaigns. But her actions don’t amount to an endorsement of all their policies, she said, arguing Young’s vague characterization seeks “to tie me to particular state or federal decisions that I did not vote on or support.”

However, even she acknowledges that some of her views do align with those of O’Malley, so there is a basis for part of the statement on Young’s flier.

Young wasn’t able to provide real evidence linking her to Obama, though. He notes that after Gardner left county government, she took a job with U.S. Sen. Barbara Mikulski, further evidence that she cleaves to the beliefs of the liberal left, Young argues. But he didn’t establish any direct connection between Gardner and Obama.

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