

Two PACs square off over Holyoke election

By [DUSTY CHRISTENSEN](#) Staff Writer Published: 10/5/2021 [Story source: Daily Hampshire Gazette](#)

HOLYOKE — With less than a month until a Nov. 2 general election, two political action committees have formed in Holyoke to boost the candidacies of competing factions for city offices.

A PAC calling itself Holyoke Forward, or Holyoke Pa'lante in Spanish, said that it would launch a campaign on Tuesday to elect 10 candidates it has chosen to endorse for mayor, City Council and School Committee. Those endorsements stand in opposition to the support another PAC, A Better Holyoke for All, has given to separate group of 11 candidates for those same races.

The PACs are throwing their weight behind two competing political factions in Holyoke and largely focus on competitive races. The two groups appear to represent the conservative-liberal divide in Holyoke, though spokespeople for both groups disputed that.

A Better Holyoke for All was initially formed in 2019 as the Keep Holyoke Affordable For All Committee — a group that successfully opposed a ballot question that year to raise taxes to build two new middle schools. The group has now renamed itself and has endorsed a slate of candidates pulled largely from its own membership, according to the PAC's president, Preston Macy, who the group has also endorsed in his bid for City Council in Ward 6.

In addition to Macy, the group has endorsed: Michael Sullivan for mayor; Kevin Jourdain, Howard Greaney and Mark Chatel for at-large seats on the City Council; Will Puello for Ward 2 councilor; David Bartley for Ward 3 councilor; Michael Thomas Siciliano for Ward 4 councilor; Linda Vacon for Ward 5 councilor; Marc Hickey for an at-large School Committee seat; and Colleen Chesmore for Ward 7 School Committee member.

Holyoke Forward/Pa'lante, meanwhile, has backed the other candidates running in most of those same races: Joshua Garcia for mayor; Israel Rivera, Jennifer Keitt, José Luis Maldonado Velez, Paola Ferrario and Tessa Murphy-Romboletti for at-large City Council seats; Anne Thalheimer for Ward 3 councilor; Kocayne Givner for Ward 4 councilor; Guy O'Donnell for Ward 5 councilor; and Juan Anderson-Burgos for Ward 6 councilor.

A Better Holyoke for All's endorsements were made before Holyoke's preliminary mayoral election late last month, which narrowed the mayoral field down to Sullivan and Garcia. They include some of the city's more conservative politicians, including Jourdain, Vacon and Hickey, who are all Republican Party city committee members in Holyoke, according to the Mass GOP website.

"We're probably more fiscally conservative than we are socially conservative," Macy said in a phone interview Monday. However, he described the group as a collection of Republicans, Democrats and independents.

Macy said that the group's platform contains three issues: ending a gas moratorium to help bring more businesses into Holyoke, getting "a hold of our budget and stopping it from declining," and using the City Council and School Committee to push for local control of

Holyoke's schools, which are currently in state receivership. He said city voters made a good decision when they overwhelmingly rejected the 2019 ballot question to raise money to build new schools, and that his PAC is looking to reinforce that decision in these elections.

"We're really locally focused and we're trying to direct our energy at problems that are solvable and that are important," he said.

A Better Holyoke for All has come under some criticism for the lack of diversity among its endorsed candidates. In a city that is more than 50% Hispanic, Puello — who is running unopposed in November — is the only Latino candidate the group has endorsed.

"Very candidly there are very many Hispanic people who think our way but we don't know who they are," Macy said, adding that the group has made efforts to include the city's Hispanic residents.

The slate that Holyoke Forward/Pa'lante has endorsed is more diverse and appears to be more liberal. Thalheimer, for example, is a local Democratic Party ward committee chair, according to the Mass Dems website. And the PAC has named as its spokesperson William "Billy" Glidden, who was a mayoral candidate and previously served as an aide to former mayor Alex Morse.

But Glidden said that issues don't neatly map onto a left-right divide when it comes to local politics, and that the PAC supports candidates who span the political spectrum locally. He said the group wants voters to know the stakes of the election: a choice between "the dysfunction we've seen previously or a new path for the city."

In a press release, the PAC described city government as "paralyzed by obstruction, cronyism, and polarization" when it needs to be united around issues including climate change, improving infrastructure, addressing structural inequities and managing finances. It noted that as city councilors, Sullivan, Bartley, Greaney, Vacon and At-Large Councilor James Leahy all voted in 2020 to reject a \$275,000 grant to help Holyoke transition away from fossil fuels.

"Holyoke needs more effective leadership," the group said. "It's time for a new mayor, a brand new council, and a school committee that will work to regain local control without backsliding on progress already made."

Both PACs will be able to raise and spend money ahead of the general election on Nov. 2.

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