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Panetta, Lucius trade views on Israel, ISIS

By CHRIS COUNTS

SPEAKING BEFORE about 150 people Feb. 8 at Congregation Beth Israel in Carmel Valley, two candidates vying for retiring Congressman Sam Farr's seat tackled some of the most challenging foreign policy issues the United States is facing today in the Middle East.

Aside from a few partisan jabs, there were only subtle differences between the views of Jimmy Panetta, a Democrat, and Casey Lucius, a Republican.

The candidates forum was organized by Todd Hornik, a member of the congregation and, like Panetta, a deputy district attorney for Monterey County. Hornik started by asking the candidates to describe the current state of U.S.-Israeli relations, and explain how each would strengthen that bond.

Lucius cited President Barack Obama's infamous failure to back up his "red line" threat against Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and his subsequent nuclear weapons deal with Iran as examples of how the country's relationship with Israel "has been damaged over the past seven years." She said Americans need to "work with Israel" to stop the flow of weapons to terrorists and support defense systems like Israel's Iron Dome that have saved thousands of lives.

'Our strongest ally'

"Israel is one of our most important security relationships," explained Lucius, a Pacific Grove City Councilwoman who served in the United States Navy and taught at the Naval Postgraduate School and Naval War College. "Unfortunately, Israel is surrounded by threats."

The son of Leon Panetta — whom Farr replaced in the House of Representatives — Panetta described the U.S.-Israeli relationship as "tense" and "not the best, but not the worst." He also described Israel as more than just an ally.

"They're family," said Panetta, a Carmel Valley resident who served in the Navy reserve and earned a Bronze Star during a tour in Afghanistan. "The United States must always be committed to protecting Israel, which is our strongest ally and the only democracy in Middle East."

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Beach fires set for March council meeting

■ Law on wood-burning fireplaces also in the works

By MARY SCHLEY

THE MUCH debated issue of fires on Carmel Beach — whether they are a deadly pollutant or just a fun pastime, how many should be allowed, if people should be permitted to use real wood or be limited to propane, where they should be built and how they should be controlled — is set to return to the city council for discussion at its March 1 meeting, Mayor Jason Burnett said this week.

At the Feb. 2 council meeting, resident Jeanne McCulloch presented a petition with nearly 300 signatures asking the city to continue allowing some wood-burning fires on the beach, rather than banning them altogether, as a narrow majority of the council wants.

A handful of other members of the public also stood to defend the tradition, including those who reminisced about

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Panetta said we need to assure that Israel "has the best defense products to defend themselves."

Next, Hornik asked the candidates to comment on the Israeli-Palestinian relationship and offer solutions for making it better.

Panetta warned there will be "a bleak period ahead" because the Palestinians "are weak and divided" and have "no incentive" to reach a negotiated settlement. He suggested the U.S. needs to "employ a special envoy to engage Israel and make sure parties at the table stay focused" on a two-state solution.

"Compromises will need to be made," he said.

While Lucius agreed a two-state solution is necessary, she said it has to be "arrived at by the parties themselves."

Lucius said the U.S. will need to work with countries like Saudi Arabia to fund improvements to infrastructure and education in a future Palestinian state. "We need to create an environment of mutual respect," she explained. "We want to raise up the next generation of Palestinians to not be violent."

Other topics addressed at the forum included foreign aid, the refugee crisis, a resurgent Russia and ISIS.

Panetta was particularly passionate when he talked about refugees. He noted that there are 30 civil wars currently being fought across the globe, and the Syrian War alone has displaced 6.5 million people.

Besides providing refugees with a safe haven and assistance, Panetta said "we need to protect them from right-wing hatred."

"The U.S. should accept its share of the refugees," he suggested. "How many times do we have to see photos of children washed up on the shore? We cannot remain indifferent to the carnage. We can't be silent to those huddled masses — it's a humane thing and it's an American thing."

'Compassionate, but prudent'

Lucius agreed the U.S. needs to accept more refugees, but she criticized the Obama administration's handling of the crisis. She described the screening process for refugees as "very thorough and robust" but "not perfect." "We need to be compassionate, but also prudent," she said.

When asked about Russia, Lucius said the Obama administration has allowed the one-time superpower "to set the agenda" in the Middle East. She also suggested it would benefit the U.S. to make Europe less dependent on Russian oil.

"We need to put Putin back in his box," she said. "We need to step up and be leaders again."

Panetta said Russia is weaker than it was during the Cold War, and he doesn't believe the country wants to get in a war with us.

"The key is dealing from a place of strength," he explained. "We need to make clear we will draw a line."

As for ISIS, Panetta said he's wary of being drawn into a military conflict with the terrorist group. "They want us to send boots on the ground," he explained. "They want a full-scale war."

Noting that ISIS has lost as much as 40 percent of its territory since 2014, Panetta urged that the U.S. take "a measured approach" in the battle against the terrorist group.

Panetta also said it's important to win the hearts and minds of young Muslims. "We need to look at what causes [them] to become extremists and counter that," he suggested.

Lucius said we need to employ our most advanced technology to defeat ISIS.

"They need the Internet to recruit," she said. "We need to launch cyber attacks against their websites."

She also accused the U.S. of not having a coherent strategy for dealing with ISIS. "The U.S. has got to figure out what direction we're going," she insisted. "We're at a crossroads." Lucius also suggested that the U.S. needs to "commit 15,000 and 20,000 troops" to the fight.

"The preferred statement is 'no boots on the ground,' but that's a myth," she said. "We have boots on the ground in 150 countries."

Lucius said the decision to send U.S. soldiers into battle isn't something she would ever take lightly. "I know firsthand the sacrifice our military people make," she declared.

In summary, Lucius said her background makes her well suited for the Congressional seat. She said residents in this district need someone who can "roll their sleeves up" and "work with the other side."

"People have asked me, 'Shouldn't you run for [county] supervisor or [Pacific Grove] mayor?,'" she said. "But my background is in national security. I can bring a lot to the table."

Like Lucius, Panetta said he is often questioned why he would want to be a congressman — a job that would require him to deal with the deep divisions in Congress.

"I'm optimistic about what our never-perfect democratic experiment can offer the world," he added. "As [President] Lincoln said, we are the best hope on earth. I look forward to that challenge."