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Newport News mayoral candidates Pat Woodbury and McKinley Price have different approaches to combating gangs

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NEWPORT NEWS — Mayoral candidates Pat Woodbury and McKinley Price agree the city should do more to combat gangs. But they disagree on the approach to solving gang violence. The two, who are running in the May 4 election, have been touting their anti-gang programs on the campaign trail.

Price advocates a comprehensive program similar to Richmond's, which landed a \$2.5 million grant in 2004 to combat gangs. Crime has decreased in Richmond, and officials say the gang prevention program, GRIP, is one of the reasons.

Woodbury is pushing for a narrower approach — a mentoring program pairing disabled veterans with gang members. Woodbury said the city has a tight budget and does not have a \$2.5 million grant, so it doesn't make sense to start an expensive program. "My concern (with Price's program) is sustainability," Woodbury said.

Price said the city can tap into \$200,000 in federal funds to start the program. And he said it costs more tax money to incarcerate gang members. "The jails are full," Price said. "But I don't feel any safer than I did 10 years ago." Price said he's suggesting the soon-to-be-vacated South Morrison Elementary School building for a center where teenagers can attend before-school and after-school programs.

Newport News resident Bobby Kipper, who worked with Richmond's program, said GRIP did many things at once, including school dropout prevention, youth outreach, advertising, mentoring and programs where residents "took back" their community from gangs. "These are deep-rooted community issues, so you can't just do one thing," said Kipper, who heads the National Center for the Prevention of Community Violence.

Meanwhile, Woodbury's idea is also based on an existing program, the Norfolk-based Hampton Roads Gangs Task Force. Andrew Daniels, founder of the Hampton Roads Gangs Task Force, said his program is currently helping about 40 gang members in Norfolk and Virginia Beach, pairing them with disabled veterans for mentoring. "These kids have a sense of invincibility," Daniels said. "But they see someone who has lost a limb, it gives them a dose of reality about guns."

Having candidates focused on the gang issue is helpful, said Newport News resident Andre Gray, of the antiviolence group Young Executives. "There's a lot of people in gangs, and there will continue to be, unless the city comes up with programs," Gray said.

Gang prevention Warwick High School will host a gang prevention program at 6 p.m. Thursday. Former Newport News police officer Bobby Kipper will discuss Richmond's approach to solving gang violence.

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