

El Paso Times

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Democracy at work in candidate session hosted by EPISO, Border Interfaith

David Burge, El Paso Times

Feb. 18, 2018

Leaders with EPISO and Border Interfaith host what they call candidate "accountability sessions." They identify issues that are important to the families they represent and have candidates address those topics.

Grassroots representative democracy was at work Sunday in the Lower Valley.

About 500 people attended what organizers called a candidate "accountability session" at the St. Paul the Apostle Catholic Church, 7424 Mimosa Ave.

Organized by the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization and Border Interfaith, the event emphasized issues that are important to families across El Paso County. These issues were identified in a series of grassroots meetings spanning the community.

Candidates for U.S. Congress were asked if they supported a "fast-track" pathway to citizenship for so-called Dreamers, whether they would support funding for the Environmental Protection Agency to clean up air quality in the Borderland and whether they would support universal health care and advocate for Medicaid expansion.

Six candidates for U.S. Congressional District 16 attended and all answered yes to those three questions.

Former County Judge Veronica Escobar said she has worked with EPISO and Border Interfaith on their issues for years, first when she was a county commissioner and then as county judge.



State Rep. Joe Moody, the incumbent in State Representative District 78, makes a point during Sunday's accountability session. (Photo: David Burge)

“You know my ‘yeses’ are good,” she said. “We have worked together for years. You have seen me continually fight for El Paso and our immigrant community.”

Former El Paso Independent School District Board President Dori Fenenbock said that a permanent immigration fix is needed to protect the rights of Dreamers.

“It is people who matter,” Fenenbock said. “You know if I can fight the forces here in

El Paso, I can fight them in Washington.”

Former state Rep. Norma Chavez said that Dreamers deserve a path to citizenship that emphasizes family reunification.

John Carrillo, another congressional candidate, said there are 9,000 Dreamers living in El Paso County.

“They are a fundamental part of who we are as a nation,” he said.

Enrique Garcia, an immigration lawyer, told the crowd “we don’t need a wall” to considerable applause.

Garcia also added that NAFTA can be used as a way to help improve the air quality in the Borderland.

Jerome Tilghman said that keeping protections in place for Dreamers is “economically smart” and that a family’s health should not be determined by their wealth.

Candidates for county judge and Commissioners Court were asked whether they would make University Medical Center of El Paso and its health clinics “a safe haven” for immigrants. They were also asked to support Medicaid expansion, to commit to funding parks and other improvements for colonias and to pass “fair chance” hiring legislation that would protect people who had served time in the criminal justice system and help them get jobs.



County Commissioner David Stout, the incumbent in Precinct 2, said he agrees with EPISO and Border Interfaith on all their issues. (Photo: David Burge)

Former County Commissioner Sergio Lewis, who is running again in Precinct 2, said yes to all the questions except for the “fair chance” hiring legislation. He called the question vague and said he opposed extending protections to violent offenders.

His opponent, incumbent County Commissioner David Stout, said he would support EPISO and Border Interfaith on all their issues.

State Legislature candidates in Districts 75 and 78 also participated. Only incumbent state Reps. Mary Gonzalez and Joe Moody attended, however.

Three county judge candidates participated as well — John Cook, Laura Enriquez and Ricardo Samaniego.

County Commissioner Andrew Haggerty, the incumbent in Precinct 4, attended, but opponent Carl L. Robinson did not.

Father Pablo Matta, the pastor at the host church, said these types of candidate sessions are important to get candidates to “hear what is important to families” in the community.

At the end of the 90-minute session, candidates were asked to agree to meet with EPISO and Border Interfaith again if they are elected.

Attendees in the audience were urged to vote and for everyone to get at least 10 family members, coworkers or friends to vote too.

“That is the important part — to get out and vote

and get 10 people to vote,” Matta said.

Early voting for the March 6 primary will begin Tuesday.

David Burge may be reached at 546-6126; dburge@elpasotimes.com; @dburge1962 on Twitter.



*Organizers with EPISO and Border Interfaith applaud during Sunday's accountability session.
(Photo: David Burge)*