

El Paso city, county candidates answer EPISO on immigration, infrastructure, more

Sara Sanchez, El Paso Times

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EPISO and Border Interfaith quizzed 10 of the candidates vying for seats on the El Paso City Council and County Commissioners Court about their positions on a local jobs program, immigration, infrastructure, and restorative justice Sunday.

The accountability session, an El Paso election season tradition staged by the EPISO and Border Interfaith nonprofit groups, was held at Christ the Savior Catholic Church, 5301 Wadsworth, in Northeast El Paso.



Photo: Sara Sanchez/El Paso Times

Each candidate is asked to give yes or no answers to four questions, and is then given 1.5 minutes to explain their answer. About 300 people attended Sunday's event.

Support for Project Arriba

Candidates were asked whether they would support and fund Project Arriba, an education and job training nonprofit in El Paso. Only Precinct 4 County Commissioner Andrew Haggerty answered the question with a no.

"Project Arriba is an amazing organization, but I just don't believe we should take county tax dollars and give them to nonprofits," Haggerty said.

Veronica Frescas, who is running to represent El Paso's West Side on City Council, District 1, said she would vote to continue the city's support for Project Arriba.

"It's an outstanding program and we should keep doing that," Frescas said. "We are helping these individuals who need it, and we should help each other contribute and put back into economic development, because that's how we're going to have our city continue to grow."

Immigration

Haggerty was also the only candidate to answer no when the candidates were asked whether they would work to make sure all residents, including immigrants, feel safe reporting crimes to law enforcement.

"The county's policies are very clear about staying out of immigration," Haggerty said. "Our sheriff has been very clear that his job is not to be the role of immigration, and I agree with that."

Carl Robinson, who is challenging Haggerty for the Precinct 4 county seat, said elected officials in the House and Senate need to work together on comprehensive immigration reform.

"We need to make sure that those individuals that we elect sit down at the same table at the same time and come up with comprehensive immigration policy," Robinson said.

Dylan Corbett, who is running to represent the South-West part of the city, on City Council, District 8, said local communities need to be "at the forefront of resistance" in the face of an immigration system in need of reform.

"Immigrants are not criminals; they are part of our community," Corbett said in Spanish.

Infrastructure

City Rep. Claudia Ordaz Perez, who represents portions of the city's East Side and Lower Valley, said that during her tenure, the City Council has set up a dedicated funding source for repairing streets.

"We have 6,117 streets and now we have for the first time in history have a funding source to tackle those streets," the District 6 representative said.

Eric Stoltz, who is challenging Ordaz Perez, said he would prioritize infrastructure improvements if elected.

"Unfortunately our city is diverting a lot of money and funds to entertainment projects and not really worrying about our infrastructure and basic needs and necessities here in El Paso," Stoltz said.

Kizito Ekechukwu, who is running for the open East El Paso City Council seat in District 5, said he would make infrastructure a priority if elected.

"Infrastructure is well-needed in my district and in the city as well," Ekechukwu said.

John Hogan, who is also running for the District 5 City Council seat, said infrastructure is what got him in the race.

"Our city has, year after year, not used funds in the proper way to give us the services we need, and we need to do something about that now," Hogan said.

Restorative Justice

EPISO leaders also asked candidates whether they would support restorative justice strategies at the city and county levels, such as working to remove barriers to employment for people leaving the criminal justice system.

All candidates said they would support restorative justice initiatives if elected.

"Yes, people deserve a second chance in our society," said city Rep. Peter Svarzbein, who represents El Paso's West Side in District 1.

Jason Osborne, a candidate for the District 5 City Council spot, said he thinks the city can go further to assist individuals leaving the criminal justice system, including setting up transitional programs.

"For so long, we've thrown inmates in cages and given them no training or support and then thrown them back into society," Osborne said.

Not in attendance

Several candidates had confirmed their attendance but did not show, including City Council Rep. Cissy Lizarraga, who represents District 8, and two of her challengers, Nicholas Vasquez and Richard Wright. Richard Bonart, who is running for City Council, District 1, also had confirmed for the event but did not attend.

District 1 candidate Carlos Corral, District 5 candidate Isabel Salcido, and District 8 candidate Greg Baine did not attend.

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