

Grassroots democracy on display during EPISO event

David Burge, El Paso Times

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(Photo: David Burge/El Paso Times)

“We the people” is how the U.S. Constitution begins and that phrase was very much in evidence Sunday afternoon during a grassroots example of participatory democracy.

The El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization and Border Interfaith -- two local nonprofit and nonpartisan organizations -- put on their version of a candidate forum, called an accountability session, at a Catholic church on the East Side.

Two of the leading candidates for El Paso mayor – Emma Acosta and Dee Margo – were absent but more than 30 other candidates for mayor, El Paso City Council and school board in the Ysleta and El Paso districts attended the event.

About 300 people packed the audience. Early voting for the May 6 election begins Monday.

“We don’t live in a vacuum,” said Father Ed Roden-Lucero, co-chairman for EPISO and pastor of St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church where the event was held.

Roden-Lucero said the two groups join up during every election cycle to put on these grassroots candidate sessions.

“The issues are geared toward the common good and improving the quality of life” for families in the Borderland, he said.

Candidates were presented with a handful of questions that the two groups decided to highlight after meeting with Borderland families and hearing their struggles, stories and challenges during the past year, Roden-Lucero said.

For the city of El Paso races, the groups wanted to know if candidates would make sure that infrastructure projects are done on time and on budget, that they would oppose state of Texas proposals to have local police enforce federal immigration law and if they would support funding for Project Arriba to the tune of \$1.5 million over five years. City candidates were also asked if they would support a living wage for subcontractors who work for the city government.

Candidates could answer yes or no for each question and then had about a minute to elaborate on all.

It was a tightly run ship and needed to be with more than 30 candidates, said Adriana Garcia, one of the co-chairs for the event.

Mayoral candidate David Saucedo said that he supported three of the four issues, but declined to support creating a living wage for subcontractor employees working for the city government.

“Our government is big enough,” he said. “Government is not the answer.”

But Saucedo was clearly the exception. Nearly all the candidates answered yes on all the issues and pledged to support EPISO and Border Interfaith on their agendas.

City Rep. Lily Limón, the incumbent in District 7, said that before she became part of the council, funding for the popular Project Arriba educational program had to be debated every year. Now, there is consensus on the City Council that this is a “great program” and needs to be funded fully, she said.

She also criticized the city government for paying some of its contracted employees minimum wage while city officials like City Manager Tommy Gonzalez and department heads earn high salaries.

Cassandra Hernandez-Brown, a candidate for City Council District 3, said yes to three issues but no to the living wage.

Hernandez-Brown said she hadn't studied the issue enough to know how implementing a living wage might impact the budget and future taxes.

In keeping with the "we the people" theme, audience members were asked to sign cards pledging to vote and to get 10 friends and family members also to vote.

Candidates were also asked to meet with EPISO and Border Interfaith within 30 days if they win. All candidates on hand agreed.

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City of El Paso candidates wait for their turn to answer some quick questions at the EPISO and Border Interfaith event Sunday.

(Photo: David Burge/El Paso Times)



City Council candidate for District 4 Diana Ramos speaks during the EPISO and Border Interfaith event.

(Photo: David Burge/El Paso Times)