

## Early voting starts today in El Paso County

By David Burge | *El Paso Times El Paso Times*

Posted:

---

Members of two nonpartisan community organizing groups are calling the May 11 local elections a historic opportunity to shape both the direction of the city of El Paso and the scandal-plagued El Paso Independent School District.

As if to prove that point, more than 600 people turned out on Sunday to hear more than 30 city and school board candidates speak at a joint forum put on by the El Paso Inter-religious Sponsoring Organization and Border Interfaith.

That's 600 people who chose to hear candidates talk instead of watching the NBA playoffs on TV or spending the day with their family at a park.

The forum was held in a jam-packed gym at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Central El Paso. It was the first time that the two groups joined together to put on an event.

"Obviously, you have the mayor and three City Council seats, and we have EPISD and everyone knows what has been going on there" with a cheating scandal, said the Rev. Ed Roden-Lucero, co-chairman of EPISO. "It's an historic occasion."

Early voting starts today and lasts through May 7.

At Sunday's political session, mayoral and City Council candidates were asked what they would do to boost economic development and reduce El Paso's 30 percent poverty rate.

City Rep. Steve Ortega, who is running for mayor, said when he was growing up, El Paso had a "can't do" attitude.

He said he decided to do something about that by serving on the City Council. Ortega rattled off a list of accomplishments -- pushing to bring Triple-A baseball to spur Downtown redevelopment, requiring city parks be built as part of any new developments and supporting the controversial addition of domestic partner benefits for gay and unmarried partners of city employees.

"We are moving in a great direction," Ortega said.

Businessman and mayoral candidate Oscar Leeser cited his company, Hyundai of El Paso, sponsoring the Sun Bowl football game as an example of a local business supporting the community.

To expand economic development, Lesser urged that the city get El Paso companies to construct millions of dollars of already approved infrastructure and quality of life projects.

Robert Cornell, another mayoral candidate, said he and his wife started the Wayside Teen Center as a way to get involved in the community and help break the cycle of poverty in El Paso.

"We have to invest in people who are here and invest in local businesses," Cormell said.

Hector Lopez, another mayoral candidate, said the average civic organization provides services to about 1,800 El Pasoans. He also said the city needs to create a "culture" where young men and women want to start their own businesses.

Candidates were asked a series of yes-or-no questions and then were given from 90 seconds to 2 minutes to make a statement, depending on the race they were in.

In City Council District 4, Raul Amaya, one of four candidates, said he would like to create a coalition to create innovative "green" or environmentally friendly projects to lower the cost of living for energy, water and waste, he said. He singled out Maj. Gen. Dana J.H. Pittard, commander of Fort Bliss, who is trying to create a Net Zero installation by 2018. That means that the Army post would be self-sufficient in energy, waste and water.

Amaya also said he'd like to create a heritage theme park that would be bigger than Mesilla, N.M. Tourism dollars are environmentally "clean" dollars, he said.

District 4 incumbent Carl Robinson cited his four years of service.

"We can talk, talk, talk," Robinson said. "I'm about action."

Among the El Paso Independent School District candidates, all agreed that the district needs to cut in half the number of mandated testing days it requires. Students can be required to take district and state tests ranging from 40 to 60 days out of a 180-day school year, the forum organizers said.

All school candidates also agreed that access to art and music programs needs to be equitable across different schools and economic classes.

Standardized testing is the "most dangerous thing put into the education system -- ever," said Rocio Benedicto, a school board incumbent and candidate in District 1.

The seeds of the cheating scandal that has rocked the district were sewn with the passage of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, she said.

Bob Geske, another District 1 candidate, said dedicating about a quarter of school days to testing is just way too much.

In District 3, Alfredo Borrego said that participating in fine arts programs helps students do well in their core subjects.

His opponent, Susie Byrd, praised the forum organizers for emphasizing the need to decrease the number of testing days.

Teachers need to be able to do "what we pay them for -- to educate our children and make it fun and interesting," she said.

David Burge may be reached at [dburge@elpasotimes.com](mailto:dburge@elpasotimes.com); 546-6126. Follow him on Twitter @dburge1962