

City's budget woes top topic at mayoral candidate forum

Costello tells host TMO he can't pledge \$1 million

By Katherine Driessen

At an otherwise uneventful mayoral forum Sunday, Councilman Steve Costello provided a rare spark when he said he could not pledge \$1 million to fund host group The Metropolitan Organization's signature jobs program, citing Houston's grim financial outlook.

In front of a crowd of roughly 500 at the New Pleasant Grove Baptist Church, the top mayoral candidates largely agreed as they answered five questions about inequality — ranging from police staffing to road improvements to wages. Former mayor of Kemah Bill King was the only top candidate not to attend, though organizers said he previously had confirmed he would be there. The Metropolitan Organization, a nonprofit, coordinates church congregations and other institutions across the region.

All of the candidates except Costello pledged \$1 million out of the city budget to fund the group's Capital IDEA program, which works to educate and then help locate living wage jobs for impoverished adults. Costello, chair of the city's Budget and Fiscal Affairs committee, said he supported the program and had previously sought funds for it but could make no guarantees given the city's looming budget deficit.

Costello has long sought to cast himself as the fiscally responsible candidate, focusing on the city's mounting pension obligations.

"I am committed to the program," Costello said. "However, that being said, I cannot commit to future funding. If I have to make a choice between letting a police officer go or a firefighter go or letting a Houston employee go versus funding Capital IDEA, I'm going to keep my employee."

'Tremendous needs'

The Metropolitan Organization limited candidate responses to one minute, asking the men to respond with a "yes" or "no" and barring them from taking shots at one another.

Questions and responses were translated into Spanish for the audience, which was predominantly Hispanic and African-American.

At the front of the church, organizers tallied candidate answers on a large report card. Save for absent King, who the organization marked with a "no" to each question, the poster was largely full of red check marks.

On the issue of how best to police the city, the candidates all agreed to pursue adding more officers but varied in how they plan to do so. The police shortage is among the biggest challenges facing mayoral candidates, and some offered more specifics Sunday on how they would tackle the problem.

According to a 2014 study commissioned by HPD, the city has about 5,300 officers to police a population of 2.2 million spread across more than 600 square miles. That is less than half the size of the police force in Chicago, a city of 2.7 million with 11,900 officers.

State Rep Sylvester Turner reiterated his plan to find \$85 million to hire 540 new officers by asking voters to modify the existing revenue cap for more public safety spending.

“In a growing city with tremendous needs, the revenue cap needs to be modified,” he said. “You cannot cap the revenue and then add more police that are needed in the city at this time.”

Though former Congressman and City Councilman Chris Bell agreed the police department needs to hire more officers, he said the city should focus on moving officers doing administrative work to patrol jobs. He said that of the 5,300 officers currently on staff, only between 200 and 500 are on the street at any given time.

Funding, staffing goals

Costello too called to fill more desk jobs with civilians, but his answer largely focused on community policing. He pledged to work on policies to encourage more officers to live inside city limits; currently 80 percent live outside Houston.

Former Harris County Sheriff Adrian Garcia did not commit to a funding or staffing goal, but said he would first tackle the city’s budget deficit and then tackle staffing.

“No one has dealt with keeping people safe more than I have,” Garcia said.

Ben Hall, 2013 mayoral runner-up, pledged to put 500 officers on the street within three years. He called on local economic development zones that have locked up millions in property tax dollars for public improvements to divert that money to public safety.

HERO mentioned

At a forum where the city’s controversial equal rights ordinance otherwise went unmentioned, Hall looped it into his public safety answer, repeating opponents’ allegation that it will allow men to enter women’s restrooms. The ordinance is headed to voters this November.

“We cannot pass dangerous laws,” Hall said. “I am the mayoral candidate that opposes the HERO ordinance that will allow men to go into the bathrooms with women. At the very least, we need to stop that dangerous law.”

His response drew scattered applause.

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