

Mayoral, Council Candidates Pledge Action on Housing, Immigration, Wages

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A mural honoring the COPS/Metro Alliance at Cassiano Homes. Scott Ball/Rivard Report

Nineteen mayoral and City Council candidates stated their support Sunday for advancing the causes of affordable housing, immigrants' rights, and living wages in San Antonio. COPS/Metro Alliance held what it called an accountability session with the candidates at St. Henry's Catholic Church Parish Hall. More than 400 people representing churches, schools, labor unions, and other institutions under the COPS/Metro Alliance umbrella attended the event.

The idea behind the session was for the organization’s members to develop an agenda of select issues – and share personal stories – while getting the candidates to state their positions on those issues.

“What makes this gathering unique is it’s an opportunity for us to share our vision for the community,” said Fr. Brian Christopher of Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. “We’re going to make our [election] decisions based on where [the candidates] stand on the issues we care about the most.”

The frontrunner mayoral candidates, as well as all contestants from Council Districts 1-8 were invited. Mayoral candidates Councilman Ron Nirenberg (D8) and Bexar County Democratic Party Chairman Manuel Medina attended, but Mayor Ivy Taylor did not.



Mayor and City Council candidates (seated to the right of the lectern) listens to COPS/Metro Alliance member Melissa Cessac speak at an accountability session at St. Henry's Catholic Church on Sunday, April 23, 2017. Edmond Ortiz/Rivard Report.

Three of the six candidates for District 1 attended – incumbent Roberto Treviño, Michael Montañó, and Robert Feria – while all four District 2 candidates – Councilman Alan Warrick, former Councilman Keith Toney, William “Cruz” Shaw, and Dori Brown – were present. Three of the seven District 3 candidates attended: incumbent Rebecca Viagran, Jessica Guerrero, and Jerome Durham. The session also included incumbent Councilman Rey Saldaña (D4) and District 5 incumbent Shirley Gonzales and challenger Richard Montez. Two of the candidates vying to replace Councilman Ray Lopez in District 6, Melissa Cabello Havrda and Ricardo “Rick” Treviño, also took part.

Ana Sandoval was the lone participating District 7 candidate from a field of five that includes incumbent Cris Medina, and Tony Valdivia was the only one of the six District 8 candidates who attended.

COPS/Metro Alliance posed the same questions to each candidate, requesting a simple “yes” or “no” response. Organization members shared anecdotes on how the topics of affordable housing, immigration, and economic security hit home for them.

In housing, the candidates were asked whether they would pledge to boost the City’s funding in owner-occupied home rehabilitation by reallocating community redevelopment funds and the San Antonio Housing Trust Fund. All the candidates responded “yes.”

Attendee Elsa Menchaca told the crowd that she grew up on the Westside, where her elderly father still lives in their family home. But the house has fallen into disrepair, and her father, who served in World War II and worked at Kelly Air Force Base, has no money to fix up his home.

“Driving around the Westside, there’s too many homes like my father’s,” Menchaca said. “It’s not a Westside problem, an Eastside problem, a Southside problem, or a Northside problem. It’s a San Antonio problem.”

Roberto Treviño said he is especially happy that the City’s residential roof repair pilot program, “Under 1 Roof,” is being expanded. That effort, he said, should instill residents’ confidence in programs designed to help owner-occupied rehabilitation.

“We’re all in this together,” Treviño said.

Montaño, who is running against Treviño, said if the City can afford to offer tax abatements to developers, it can afford to help homeowners to fix up their houses.

“We don’t just need rehabilitated homes,” Montaño said. “You all deserve tax abatements.”

Viagran said she understood the concerns about the fate of community development block grants under President Trump’s administration.

“No matter what the federal government does with block grants, we can do great things at the City level,” she said.

Havrda said improving funding for City-facilitated owner-occupied home rehab will be a priority for her in District 6, if she is elected.

The candidates also were asked whether they would promise to create a City-issued identification for all San Antonio residents and a legal defense fund for U.S. citizen children whose parents have been deported. All the candidates said they supported those initiatives.

Jessica Guardado, a South San High School student, described how she was planning to travel abroad as part of her Spanish Advanced Placement class. In order to secure a passport, Guardado

needed her birth certificate, but complications arose because her mother did not have a valid form of U.S. government-issued identification.

“I was embarrassed,” Guardado said. “The country I called home treated me like an outsider.”

The candidates were asked to commit to raising the City’s minimum wage for municipal employees and contract workers and to increase the City’s investment in the workforce training initiative Project QUEST. The candidates affirmed their support for those actions.

Project QUEST graduate Mark Leroux told the audience that after being laid off as an IBM contractor with AT&T, he found that his technology skills had become outdated, making it difficult to find new work. He enrolled in boot camp-style class that Project QUEST developed with Rackspace Open Cloud Academy to teach eligible veterans skills to land newer high-tech jobs. Leroux ended up being hired by the local Accenture office as a software tester.

“There is no doubt that the skills I obtained had an effect on me being hired by Accenture,” he said.

District 6 candidate Rick Treviño stated his support for increasing the minimum wage in both the public and private sectors.

In delivering their final campaign pitches to the assembly, Nirenberg said San Antonio can be even greater as long as it treats its residents with compassion and openness, regardless of the issues.

“A city you deserve is one that treats you and your family with respect,” he said.

Medina described this mayoral election as “a statement and a movement.”

“It’s a challenge to the status quo,” he said.

Sr. Jane Ann Slater of the Congregation of Divine Providence wrapped up the forum by telling the crowd that San Antonians should feel informed going to the polls.

“Now, we need to get out and vote,” she said. “We need to go to our neighbors and friends and urge them to vote.”