

Costa skipping debate in Atwater

[fb fresnobee.com/2014/05/14/3927163/costa-skipping-debate-in-atwater.html](http://fresnobee.com/2014/05/14/3927163/costa-skipping-debate-in-atwater.html)

By Thaddeus Miller

Opponents vying for the 16th Congressional District will face off at debate today, but they won't be debating the incumbent.

Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, will not attend the debate planned in Atwater, according to a statement from his office. The debate is set to begin at 6:30 p.m. in the Atwater Veterans of Foreign Wars hall, Fifth Street and Broadway Avenue in Atwater.

"Congressman Costa has debated his opponent in every election cycle," the statement said. "When the four Republicans finalize the intramural race and a Republican nominee emerges after the primary, Congressman Costa will debate that individual in the fall."

Costa has held the seat since 2004.

Members of the Merced-Atwater Tea Party, which organized the event, said they have received confirmations from Steve Crass, Joanna Garcia-Botelho, Mel Levey and Job Melton.

Crass, 40, a Fresno Republican, is a Merced native and an attorney for the Baker Manock and Jensen law firm. He was a deputy district attorney in Merced County and then an assistant U.S. attorney in Fresno's federal courthouse before moving into private practice.

Garcia-Botelho, 29, also a Republican, has an agricultural business degree from Fresno State University and a law degree from the San Joaquin College of Law.

A resident of Chowchilla, she also is listed as the chief executive officer of LJB Farms and the owner of Joey's Well Drilling & Construction.

Levey, 29, a Merced Republican, is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and has served three tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, his mother, Barbara Levey, is Merced County's assessor-clerk-recorder.

Melton, 40, is a registered Democrat in the race, but only recently changed his voter registration from Republican. The mental health clinician changed registration, he says, only because there were already four Republicans in the race.

Candidate Johnny Tacherra will not be involved in the debate, according to Jim Price, co-chairman of the group. Tacherra is a Republican from Burrell near Riverdale. The 38-year-old dairyman and business owner unsuccessfully sought to challenge Costa two years ago.

The debate's format will be much like those already hosted this year by the Merced-Atwater Tea Party, according to Price. The questions will not be filtered and each answer is set to be under time restraints.

The audience, which will ask the questions, will steer the debate topics. Price said he would expect discussions on water, California's high-speed rail, veterans health issues and hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, to name a few topics.

Price recommended that people show up to the VFW hall early, as past debates have filled the room. "I really think we are going to have a big crowd," he said.

Fresno Bee writer John Ellis contributed to this report. Sun-Star staff writer Thaddeus Miller can be reached at (209) 385-2453 or tmiller@mercedsunstar.com.