

Fresno County judicial candidates spar over jail crowding

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By Rory Appleton



Candidates for Fresno County Superior Court judge participate in a debate Monday evening, May 19, 2014 at Fresno State. From left, Jarrett Cline, Lisa Gamoian, Rachel Hill, Charles Magill and Steven Smith.

THE FRESNO BEE

Five candidates for a rare opening on the Fresno County Superior Court bench took the stage at Fresno State on Monday to debate jail crowding, Three Strikes, judicial qualifications -- and throw barbs at one another.

Lisa Gamoian and Jarrett Cline hope to jump from the Fresno County District Attorney's Office to the bench. They are joined by Charles Magill, a defense attorney; Rachel Hill, a law professor; and Steven Smith, an administrative law judge.

They are seeking to replace Judge Robert Oliver, who will retire this year after nearly 20 years as a Superior Court judge. Judges serve six-year terms and can be appointed by the governor, so these openings are rare. This is the first such opening since 2008.

The candidates highlighted their résumés, endorsements and campaign platforms to argue their case for who had the best temperament to be a judge before about 20 people in the Satellite Student Union at Fresno State. But the centerpiece of the debate was a contentious clash over how best to reduce crowding in Fresno County's jail.

Gamoian blamed overcrowding on defense attorneys who seek continuances and judges who grant them. "The contagion of the Fresno County courts is continuances," she said. About 75% of the inmates in Fresno County Jail are awaiting some sort of court date, she said, adding that as a judge she would crack down on continuances.

Hill said she favored sentencing nonviolent criminals to deterrent programs. Drug rehabilitation and probation should be used to keep the jail open for the more serious criminals, she said.

Several candidates attacked Hill, saying her husband -- Fresno County Superior Court Judge Jonathan Skiles -- has been leaning on attorneys to donate to her campaign. Hill denied the allegation.

"Anyone that feels they cannot appear before my husband may go to another courtroom," she said, adding. "I am offended at this grasping to sling mud."

One of those who joined the attack on Hill was Magill, who also lashed out at other candidates. Magill, a career defense attorney, also challenged Gamoian's claim that defense attorneys were responsible for court delays.

Still, Magill agreed with Hill on the importance of programs and rehabilitation for offenders. He said that getting nonviolent offenders the help they need will keep them out of jail and open up bed space for more serious criminals.

Cline said technology would be the answer to the county court's problems and help expedite cases through the system. "I propose a smartphone app for scheduling court appearances," he said.

Cline also said he favored creating a veteran's court to try veterans separately and a commitment to ending truancy among students.

Smith stressed the importance of keeping people safe by locking up criminals regardless of how crowded the jail may be. He added that he does recognize that overcrowding is an issue, but said responsibility for solving the problem rests with Fresno County supervisors. He blamed the board for not providing the funds needed to address the county's justice needs.

"There's not much we can do as judges," he added.

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