

Fresno County supervisor candidates spar over pot, indigent care, employees

By Marc Benjamin

Brian Pacheco SPECIAL TO THE FRESNO BEE

Fresno County supervisorial candidates verbally sparred Wednesday night during a debate at Fresno City College but often expressed only subtle distinctions between themselves.

The candidates in District One, Blong Xiong and Brian Pacheco, along with District Four candidates Buddy Mendes and Daniel Parra, shared common ground on the county's justice system, employee relations and specialty medical care for undocumented immigrants.

The 75-minute debate was hosted by The Bee, Community Media Access Collaborative (CMAC) and the Fresno County Farm Bureau.

Pacheco, a farmer, school trustee and hospital board member, said the county must maximize its dollars to keep deputies on patrol and prosecutors and public defenders working in the court system to keep the jail from getting too clogged with inmates whose trials are yet to occur.

"It's about maximizing our dollars like we do in the private sector," he said.

His opponent, Xiong, agreed that there is too much inefficiency in the jail and courts that allow some inmates to be released from custody because of overcrowding.

But he also said the county serves as the "social safety net" and dollars are not the only thing that matters.

"The county is not about dollars, it's about people," he said. "The county has a huge responsibility to make sure all of our residents are in the best shape."

Both Pacheco and Xiong were critical of supervisors' vote to end a contract for specialty care for the poor and undocumented residents. The contract, which ends later this year, would have cost the county \$6 million next year.

Xiong said Pacheco could have done more to help the county since he sits on the Community Medical Centers hospital board.

Pacheco said if he had been on the board of supervisors, he would have tried to find the \$6 million necessary to keep the program intact.

The District Four candidates voiced similar sentiments.

Parra, a Fowler City Council member for six years and computer systems analyst, said health care for the poor is a moral issue and he would work to bring specialty care back.

Mendes, a farmer, school board trustee and utilities district board member, said the county needed to look "a little bit closer" at spending that \$6 million to save the program.

All four candidates agreed that they would not have granted raises to management employees without offering raises



to their rank-and-file workers first.

Mendes and Pacheco said they gave equal raises to school employees and administrators.

"I've never been on a board that gave a chief executive a raise that did not give its rank and file the same raise," Mendes said.

Xiong, a Fresno City Council member, said county and city employees are on the front lines and "make us electeds look good."

Parra said all Fowler's employees and management didn't get raises during the recession, but none were laid off and all got similar raises when the economy began pick up again.

All four questioned the county's medical marijuana cultivation ban, which was the subject of a 5 1/2 hour board of supervisors meeting on Monday. While the county issued \$700,000 in liens, most of those fined say they can't afford to pay.

Xiong said the county's implementation should have been slower to address the "many needs of all of our community." He said there are people who need medical marijuana for pain relief.

Pacheco said there were people abusing the system with 20- and 40- acre groves. He said he will work with experts to find out law enforcement's needs. But he added that "zero tolerance might be a little bit harsh."

While Mendes said he agreed with the program because marijuana cultivation has evolved into a serious public safety issue, he can see where the county ordinance could use some tweaking.

He said he questions the appeals process and supervisors spending large amounts of time in meetings on the issue.

Parra said medical marijuana is still permitted with significant limits in Fowler, but he also recognizes the county's problem.

The most contentious moments were between Parra and Mendes after Parra suggested that Mendes got \$38,000 from Granville homes for his campaign.

Calling it a "cheap shot," Mendes accused Parra of getting the bulk of his money from organized labor. Parra said he has only received about \$6,000 from the county's largest union, the Service Employees International Union.

KEY DATES

Oct. 6: Vote-by-mail ballots and sample ballots mailed to voters

Oct. 20: Last day to register to vote

Oct. 28: Last day to request a vote-by-mail ballot by mail

Nov. 4: General Election

ELECTION OFFICES

Fresno County: 2221 Kern St., Fresno; [details](#) or (559) 600-VOTE (8683)

Tulare County: 5951 S. Mooney Blvd., Visalia; [details](#) or (559) 624-7300

Kings County: 1400 W. Lacey Blvd., Hanford; [details](#) or (559) 582-3211, ext. 4401

Madera County: 200 W. Fourth St., Madera; [details](#) or (559) 675-7720

Merced County: 2222 M St., Merced; [details](#) or (209) 385-7541

Mariposa County: 4982 10th St., Mariposa; [details](#) or (209) 966-2007

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