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Unusually big crowd of 1,000 bused in to mayoral forum

THREE CANDIDATES AGREE TO ACTIVIST GROUP'S SOCIAL SERVICES, EDUCATION AGENDA

By Phil Yost

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The activist organization PACT on Sunday pushed San Jose's five major candidates for mayor to sign on to its education and social-service goals at a downtown gathering that was part forum, part seminar and part rally.

Three agreed. Two didn't.

Before an audience of 1,000 people, the faith-based community group People Acting in Community Together asked the candidates to sign a "covenant" to pursue goals such as more charter schools and more funding for parks and community centers.

Vice Mayor Cindy Chavez, Councilman Dave Cortese and former Councilman David Pandori, now a deputy district attorney, agreed to PACT's entire platform. Councilman Chuck Reed agreed to only one element. Businessman Michael Mulcahy would not sign any of them.

"I can't sign a pledge that I'm not sure I can honor in every instance," Mulcahy told the crowd.

PACT does not endorse candidates, but over the years it has held rallies such as the one Sunday at Parkside Hall, turning out large crowds. Charter buses were lined up outside the auditorium.

Unlike the typical neighborhood forum devoted simply to questions and answers, the event featured singing, prayer, video presentations and explanations of why PACT was seeking specific promises. The audience was the largest the candidates have appeared before in the campaign.

After their opening remarks, the candidates were limited to discussing whether they agreed or disagreed with the elements in the PACT pledge.

Public school choice, including charter schools and so-called "small schools" that are created within larger ones, was the issue to which the program devoted the most attention. Encouraging mayors to get involved in education even though it is not in their formal job description, PACT asked candidates to promise to work for 10 new charter schools and help raise \$10 million to start charters.

Chavez, Cortese and Pandori unhesitatingly supported the idea, with Pandori saying he would raise the \$10 million by selling two properties the city has recently purchased in hopes of landing a baseball team.

Reed called charter schools a "tremendous innovation," but said "it is a mistake to turn the mayor's office into a fundraising operation."

He also opposed, as "the wrong way to do budgeting," PACT's request for a pledge to add \$600,000 in city funds to after-school programs. Mulcahy agreed that the whole city council should make such decisions. Chavez, Cortese and Pandori endorsed PACT's proposal.

"An extended school day is one of the things we know works," Chavez said. "It's not complicated."

Asking candidates to promise to find more funds to maintain parks and keep community centers open provided an opportunity for some of the candidates to repeat criticisms of some city expenditures that they have been making for weeks.

Cortese noted his vote against a \$4 million subsidy for the Grand Prix race downtown and the semipermanent "tent" expansion of the convention center.

The current budget priorities are "way out of whack," Mulcahy said. "I think we have the money in our hands right now."

Although the budget for police is up \$40 million, Pandori said, it's all in salaries, not more officers. "The unions at the city are too powerful," he said, "and you are getting shortchanged."

All the candidates except Mulcahy agreed with PACT that the city should devote a greater percentage of its housing subsidies to people categorized as "extremely low-income." Such housing is more expensive per unit.

"If we have to build less units in order to put more money into extremely low housing," Cortese said, "that's what we'll do."

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