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San Jose Candidate Forum Focused On Downtown Business Community

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San Jose Spotlight

Candidates running for the District 3 seat on the San Jose City Council shared their thoughts on downtown politics with the city's business community as the election approaches next month.

Gabby Chavez-Lopez, executive director of the Latina Coalition of Silicon Valley, and Planning Commission Chair Anthony Tordillos appeared at the Rotary Club Summit Center for a Thursday forum hosted by San Jose Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Leah Toeniskoetter and recently-appointed interim Downtown Association CEO Alan "Gumby" Marques. The two downtown business advocates took turns asking the candidates more than a dozen questions, with topics ranging from supporting small businesses, tying city executives' pay to their performance and the San Jose mayor's plan to arrest homeless residents who refuse shelter three times within an 18-month period.

"We ask that you do go beyond high level responses, and provide specifics and examples where you can answer any questions," Toeniskoetter told candidates at the start of the forum.

The special downtown election will take place June 24.

Moderators asked candidates how they will improve business-friendly environments across all sectors of industry, including nightlife and public safety. About 60,000 businesses call San Jose home, Toeniskoetter said, with the majority employing less than a few dozen workers.

Chavez-Lopez said she intends to support organizations like the San Jose Chamber of Commerce because they backed her when she led the development of the Latina Coalition of Silicon Valley. She said her support of the organization will translate into impactful policies.

"We need to keep looking at opportunities to provide incentives, purposes to operate at low cost in the beginning, especially parking incentives," Chavez-Lopez said. "The realities that my employees face are barriers, and in some cases, we need to remove those barriers to make sure that businesses have a strong footing here."

Tordillos praised recent business tax break incentives passed by city officials and said San Jose's storefront activation grant program provided \$30,000 to small businesses filling vacant storefronts.

"The city needs to focus on things like streamlining permitting for people trying to open businesses in San Jose," he said. "I talked with a business owner opening a new bar on Fountain Alley who struggled for close to five months just trying to get a permit for outdoor dining. We need to make sure that we are making it as easy as possible when folks want to invest in our downtown community."

Pay for performance

The District 3 candidates were split on San Jose Mayor Matt Mahan's proposal to tie the pay raises of city officials to their perceived performance. The proposal is modeled after a California law that allows the withholding of pay for state lawmakers if they don't pass a budget on time.

Union-represented city employees won't be subject to performance-based pay increases if the policy moves forward -- and it'd still need to go before voters for final approval.

Chavez-Lopez said she opposes the plan, while Tordillos said he favored it.

"I've talked to a lot of folks who feel demoralized because every election cycle, politicians come forward with promises to solve all the city's problems, but then they don't feel like they see progress," Tordillos said. "This really comes back down to government accountability."

Chavez-Lopez said measuring a politician's performance based on metrics won't allow for the agility elected officials require to address the specific needs of their districts.

"It kind of pigeonholes us into like certain priorities that are predetermined, that then incentivize kind of short-term thinking, as well as not long-term, sustainable solutions," she said. "I worry about that, and what the outcomes of that could be. I would need more clarity."

Responsibility to shelter

Both candidates said they oppose any San Jose policy leading to the increased incarceration of homeless residents, including Mahan's "Responsibility to Shelter" policy, which is set to have a dedicated police force to cite and arrest unhoused people for trespassing.

Chavez-Lopez said there has to be equitable responsibility between the city and Santa Clara County to have better outcomes for homeless residents refusing or not receiving shelter.

"The onus shouldn't be put on the residents to figure out where the county ends and the city starts," she said. "Launching a joint homelessness coordination office that is housed in (District 3) focused on our district is going to be really important."

The city's focus needs to be on increasing shelter capacity, Tordillos said, because the majority of homeless residents choose shelter when it's offered and available.

"Even after all of the shelter beds that the city has in the pipeline are completed, we'll still have about a 3,000-bed shortage," he said. "So we can actually ramp up our shelter capacity and invest in programs like safe sleeping sites and safe parking sites."

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