



# Meet the candidates — but not at forums

## Traditional events tend to serve sponsors' self-interest

BY TOM CARTER

**T**HE most common way voters meet District 6 candidates is at a candidates' forum. But the candidates say most forums are poorly run, don't give them enough time to make their points, and too often aim to serve only the sponsoring organization.

The ideal way to meet the candidates is one-on-one, by pounding the pavement, they say, or addressing a group of neighbors in somebody's home. But with 43,000 voters in sprawling District 6, a forum is more practical, and it's traditional. Even so, it's unwieldy, especially this year; District 6 has 14 candidates.

Most forums draw 20 to 100 people, though a few — including the Yerba Buena Art Forum on Aug. 17 — get around 200.

"The Young Democrats on June 23 had a crowd of about 200 but many were from out of the neighborhood," says candidate Matthew Drake, who also ran in 2006, finishing third. "The forums are similar, but the big difference in this election is no incumbent — and people moving here to run."

He raises a popular point, inferring carpet-bagging. Even so, all the candidates have lived more than a year in District 6. Theresa Sparks moved here in August 2009, and Jane Kim arrived in January 2009. Two others, Dean Clark and Elaine Zamora, became residents in 2007. Jim Meko has been here the longest, 33 years.

### SoMa FORUMS MAINLY IN SOUTH BEACH

The 19 publicized forums held or planned from April 20 through Oct. 23 in District 6 split evenly between SoMa and the Tenderloin with seven each. Five of the SoMa sites were in South Beach.

Most of the candidates say the main issues at the forums are housing, business development, safety, sit/lie and pension reform. The questions they get

north and south of Market differ somewhat. The Tenderloin is interested in safety, SRO life and a supermarket. In SoMa it's nightclubs, sit/lie, parking and smoking. The effects of homelessness seem a little more worrisome in SoMa. "I get questions around what I call pee and poo issues," Meko says.

Usually, some candidates are no-shows — job conflicts, sickness, family emergencies, etc. But a few bite the bullet to show up. Debra Walker participated at a Koret Auditorium forum with a 103-degree fever. Sparks showed up at the U.C. Hastings Law School forum with a bandaged arm and facing surgery the next day. Four days before, at a forum in City College's Diego Rivera auditorium, she was descending the rail-less stage steps, caught a heel, fell, twisted her ankle, chipped a tooth and broke her right arm. "I was expecting applause," the fallen candidate quipped later.

### NOT ALL CANDIDATES ATTEND

But not all candidates care about forums. George Davis parades around nude to discourage censorship and promote freedom of expression. The only forum he attended was Aug. 19 at a Mission Street Latin club, where he thought he had a crack at the endorsement. He didn't get it and won't attend any others, he says.

With special interests of sponsoring groups driving forum questioning, some major issues fall by the wayside. "Food for seniors," James Keys says, doesn't come up, "and it's more important than low-cost housing."

Not all 14 candidates are invited to each of the forums. The Young Democrats sent 10 pages of questions to the candidates, then invited to their June forum the five candidates they thought answered best. Sometimes being among the top five money-raisers is a criterion — or the sole one — for an invitation. Several candidates criticize that.

"I'm sensitive to that," says Meko. "But with 14

candidates and giving them five minutes, there goes your evening."

The South Beach/Rincon/Mission Bay Neighborhood Association invited only the top five fund-raising candidates. Four showed up. The forum was held on the UCSF Mission Bay campus in Genentech's gleaming new Byers Auditorium, which seats 261. About 80 attended to hear Jane Kim, Jim Meko, Theresa Sparks and Debra Walker. With Elaine Zamora absent because of a family emergency, it allowed more time for the others and more flexibility from Scott Shafer, KQED host and reporter, who moderated.

Shafer shaped questions from the sponsoring association and written questions from the audience. After 90-second self-introductions (Sparks gave hers 25 minutes late, when she arrived), each candidate had one minute to answer a common question, prompted by a 10-second warning flag, followed by the red flag, which was politely observed. Shafer interjected follow-up questions to clarify or expand answers. Toward the end, candidates drew names to ask each other questions.

The 90-minute session was swift and efficient, no outbursts or interruptions, and it ended on time. The candidates spoke fast to utilize every second. They were civil to each other, acknowledged similar positions and weren't remotely snide. There were no direct hits, either.

The well-oiled South Beach forum was a contrast to the sometimes long and often convoluted questions moderator and Assemblywoman Fiona Ma had collected at the Sept. 20 forum in spacious Koret Auditorium, sponsored by Mental Health Contractors Association and Human Service Services Network. The questions were sometimes answered in kind. But there were no assurances, either, that simple was better. When Ma asked, "Why are you running?"

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