

THE STATE

Hey, Buddy, Can You Spare a Vote -- for Me?

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R. Martin Johnson Garcia plans to rise from his sidewalk sleeping spot near Central Avenue this morning, put his belongings into his shopping cart and embark on a day of campaigning.

With a stock of candy and cigarettes to hand out, the 41-year-old skid row resident hopes to persuade voters to choose him this afternoon when they fill the city's only elected office reserved for a homeless person.

But Garcia faces stiff competition. Four others are also running for the homeless seat on the Downtown Los Angeles Neighborhood Council, including an unemployed lawyer and a self-described "monarchist."

Organizers of the 2-year-old city-funded advisory panel created the unusual seat to give an official voice to the estimated 11,000 people living in and around skid row. But the number of homeless candidates running in the downtown council's second election has taken even some of the participants by surprise.

"I actually didn't think there would be much competition," said Max Delsoin, who graduated from law school at Washington University in St. Louis but now lives in a hotel near skid row.

Interest in the council from a group often perceived as disengaged and disenfranchised is so high that two other candidates without permanent homes are seeking to represent the Fashion District and Central City East on the 27-member council. The downtown neighborhood council, like 80 others across the city, advises the mayor and City Council.

Bilal Ali, 52, who lived on skid row until six months ago when he moved into a subsidized hotel room, is running to represent the Fashion District. On Friday afternoon, the former paralegal took a campaign swing through the area he wants to represent.

He had planned to canvass the luxurious new Santee Court loft apartments.

But Ali, though engaging and nicely dressed, is missing a lot of front teeth and did not look the part of the hip, downtown loft dweller. Neither the handyman nor the security guard offered to help him get to the apartments upstairs.

So down the street he went, past the discount clothing storefronts and men sipping from paper bags, and into the lobby of that other type of downtown residence, the kind of place with a locked metal door where tenants rent rooms by the week.

"Hi, I'm Bilal Ali," he told a young woman in the dingy lobby of a hotel on Los Angeles Street. "A vote for me is a vote for you. This is for the neighborhood council. This is folks like me and you, getting our voices heard."

The woman smiled and accepted his flier but said nothing.

As the graceful old buildings around skid row are transformed into luxury lofts and upscale stores and restaurants, candidates like Ali want to make sure their community isn't forgotten.

"Our voices need to be at the table ... to help City Hall make decisions," Ali said, explaining that he thinks the city's leaders lack the "political and creative will" to address the homeless problem.

Delsoin, who wound up downtown a year ago, thinks homeless shelters are dehumanizing and ought to be reformed, with "food that's not expired" and better education and job-training opportunities.

But some of the candidates, he figures, are also seeking "self-actualization because, in every aspect of their lives, they are demolished, humiliated and seen as non-persons."

Having an elected seat reserved for a homeless person may be unique to Los Angeles, according to Donald Whitehead, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, D.C.

But then, so is the community the seat holder represents.

The 50 square blocks that comprise skid row — from 3rd to 7th streets and Main to Alameda streets — make up one of the largest homeless districts in the nation. An estimated 11,000 of the county's 80,000 homeless people sleep each night on the streets, in shelters and in single-room-occupancy hotels.

As downtown undergoes a revitalization, the homeless have become a point of contention and downtown business interests have pressured the city to clean up the area.

Skid row is loud, colorful, pungent — an explosion of humanity. Tents, cardboard boxes, makeshift beds and sprawled bodies crowd the sidewalks. Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and drug dealers share space with preachers and pickpockets. Free meals abound, but dignity and a private place to go to the bathroom are hard to find.

It is a world few understand if they have not lived there, many homeless people say.

"I consider this my home," said Garcia, who said he has lived on and off skid row since losing his job in 1991. "I've met a lot of really good people down here."

If elected, he said, he would press the police to stop rousting sleeping people from the sidewalks at dawn.

"It's making people's lives more difficult — people who already have a lot of difficulties. They are dealing with drug addiction and poverty and looking for jobs and, on top of all this, they have the police."

Orlando Ward, director of public affairs for the Midnight Mission, said it was crucial that perspectives such as Garcia's were represented on the board.

Ward said last year's homeless representative on the council, Andrew Johnson, "challenged people to rethink their own ideas about housing, homelessness and law enforcement."

When the City Council last fall outlawed urinating or defecating in public, for example, Johnson spoke passionately about the effect the law would have on denizens of skid row, where public toilets are scarce. (Colleagues said Johnson was unable to finish out his term because he recently moved to the East Coast. He could not be reached for comment.)

Mayor James K. Hahn said the homeless representatives "help us have a healthy debate about the issues downtown."

And City Councilwoman Jan Perry, who represents the downtown area, said: "If we give them a tool, they use it. It's called self-determination."

But even with its homeless representative, said Alice Callaghan, an Episcopal priest who is director of the social service agency Las Familias del Pueblo, the downtown neighborhood council is paying only token attention to the homeless issue.

The council is "interested in how to make the streets cleaner for itself," Callaghan said. "If they were

interested in solving the homeless problem, they would be at the mayor's office demanding more housing."