

LOS ANGELES

Mayoral Candidates Woo Neighborhood Councils

Hahn and challengers make the rounds at the L.A. Convention Center as community representatives learn about municipal issues.

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It was nearly impossible to get through the Los Angeles Convention Center on Saturday without being wooed by a man seeking to become the next mayor of Los Angeles.

The Congress of Neighborhoods is held twice each year for representatives from the city's 80 neighborhood councils to network, learn about city bureaucracy and study municipal issues. This year, with a contested mayoral election less than five months away, it was too tempting an event for a candidate to miss — even when all but the incumbent mayor were prohibited from speaking to the general assembly.

There was Councilman Antonio Villaraigosa, up and dressed while much of the city still slept, speaking in the morning in favor of a county measure to raise the sales tax to pay for more police.

Down another hall a few hours later came Councilman Bernard C. Parks — uncharacteristically casual in an orange polo shirt, fashionably untucked — popping into a forum on gay and lesbian issues.

In the banquet room, his progress slowed by all the people he stopped to hug, was former Assembly Speaker Bob Hertzberg. State Sen. Richard Alarcon (D-Sun Valley) also was there.

And out in the lobby stood one of the lesser-known candidates, Bill Wyatt, passing out a biography that described him as a veteran of several other unsuccessful campaigns, including a run in the 2003 recall election against Arnold Schwarzenegger and five state GOP primaries in 2000 against George Bush.

Another lesser-known candidate, Walter Moore, a lawyer who is the only Republican running so far, said he distributed nearly 300 fliers.

Mayor James K. Hahn, who is seeking a second term in the March election, gave not one, but two speeches, and also tripped through the halls embracing staff members and volunteers and chatting animatedly about subjects as varied as defibrillators and Los Angeles International Airport. As the mayor, Hahn gave the welcoming address to the entire convention, while the other candidates had to content themselves with speaking to

smaller gatherings.

"They're sucking out all the oxygen," one council staff member complained as two candidates swirled by, eyeing each other carefully as they made the rounds talking to clumps of neighborhood leaders.

Indeed, when an afternoon forum on a county proposal to close the trauma center at Martin Luther King Jr./Drew Medical Center drew Alarcon, Hahn and Parks into one small room, a community organizer felt compelled to issue a warning. "We don't want to hear about the campaign," said Robert Cole. "We want to hear about ... how we can fix this." The candidates followed the rules.

Hahn, whose father, the late county Supervisor Kenneth Hahn, spearheaded King/Drew's construction after the Watts riots, said the medical center "has been under attack from Day One" by people "who have never accepted that people of color" can run a hospital. He also criticized The Times' coverage of the hospital, saying the paper focuses on errors there but ignores problems at other hospitals.

As the mayor spoke, his sister, Councilwoman Janice Hahn, sat in the audience, nodding her head and saying: "That's right" and "Yes."

"King/Drew is a beautiful thing," the mayor said. "We need to fight for it now." Then he and several members of his staff swept out of the room before the other candidates spoke.

Alarcon was up next. "Mayor Hahn knows we don't have to disagree on everything," the state senator said before launching into an account of how his own son, who died as a young child after a car accident, had to be airlifted out of the San Fernando Valley because there was no pediatric trauma center there. He also related how doctors at King/Drew saved his nephew's eye when physicians elsewhere could not.

"This isn't just a south-side problem," he said. "We all have to work together to solve it."

All day, Alarcon sported a sticker that demanded: "Roll Back My Water Rates," and he and other volunteers spent hours collecting signatures on petitions calling on the city to repeal the 11% rate increase authorized in the spring.

Parks also stressed the importance of keeping King/Drew's trauma center open. He said officials must improve care there and research innovative ways to insure patients throughout the county to take the pressure off financially strapped hospitals.

Most of the 600 or so neighborhood council members — who represented many races, cultures and styles of dress, including cowboy hats and handlebar mustaches — took the presence of the politicians in stride. "This is where they should be," said Terry Anderson, a board member of the Greater Valley Glen council. "This is where you meet the neighborhoods."

Nevertheless, many members of the neighborhood councils went about their business, studying zoning and ballot measures, trading advice and drinking endless cups of coffee.

They collected vast amounts of city swag, including stickers warning of the dangers of playing with kites near power lines and cardboard models of MTA buses. They oohed and aahed at the tarantula and black widow spider the zoo brought for show-and-tell. They also got to meet many of the general managers who run the city's departments.

During a morning assembly, city officials urged attendees to participate in a "treasure hunt," in which they won tickets for door prizes by answering questions about civic trivia, such as: "Who is the tallest baby in Los Angeles?" (The answer: Damani, the baby giraffe at the zoo.) Sitting in the audience, Hertzberg, who quizzed officials about city services, quipped: "Is one of the prizes mayor of Los Angeles?"