

Four Who Want His Job Tackle the Mayor

Major candidates clash on live TV over crime, transportation and campaign financing.

By Matea Gold and Michael Finnegan
Times Staff Writers

February 8, 2005

The five major candidates vying to be the next mayor of Los Angeles sparred Monday night over their approaches to crime, campaign finance and transportation in a peppery televised debate before 600 members of the city's neighborhood councils.

In one of the most animated forums yet, all four challengers took on Mayor James K. Hahn in 90 minutes punctuated by sharp exchanges, questioning whether he has done enough to add police officers, relieve gridlock and uphold ethical standards.

"It does seem kind of a four against one kind of thing here, doesn't it?" Hahn said dryly at one point.

State Sen. Richard Alarcon (D-Sun Valley), who trailed far behind his competitors in a recent Times Poll, won repeated applause from the audience with his heated denunciations of a City Hall he described as captive to special interests and with his populist call for empowering citizens over wealthy donors.

"Developers are ruining this city, and they are influencing each and every decision and taking the decision away from the neighborhood councils, where they should be," he said, garnering an enthusiastic reaction from the audience at CBS Television City in the Fairfax district.

Monday night's debate was co-sponsored by KCBS-TV Channel 2, KCAL-TV Channel 9 and the Citywide Alliance of Neighborhood Councils, which invited members of about 80 neighborhood councils to attend. Held a month before the March 8 election, it was just the fifth to feature the five top mayoral candidates.

The neighborhood groups, which began forming when Hahn took office in 2001, have asserted themselves in this year's election, sponsoring mayoral forums and candidate meet-and-greets.

"The advisory vote of the neighborhood council is ignored by any elected officials at their peril," Hahn said.

At the forum, broadcast live on KCAL, members of the councils queried the candidates, and two KCAL anchors acted as moderators.

The audience frequently weighed in with applause and cheers for Hahn's rivals, especially Alarcon, who jabbed relentlessly at City Hall. The state senator voiced support

for giving neighborhood councils authority over planning and land use in their communities, a move others said would require a change in the law.

The squabbling between the candidates began within minutes, as the mayor's rivals challenged his assertion that Los Angeles was safer under his watch.

Former Assembly Speaker Bob Hertzberg seized on the slow growth of the police force, arguing that Hahn has not spent enough money on public safety.

"He chose to spend 97% of the new money he's had since he's been mayor of Los Angeles — \$450 million — on priorities other than police," Hertzberg said, holding up a pie chart.

Hahn disputed that, noting that crime has dropped significantly during his term, even as he acknowledged frustration with the size of the Police Department, one of the most understaffed among major cities.

"Unfortunately for me," Hahn said, "I became mayor at the time when the Sacramento budget mess that was created by several of these people up here actually took money away from Los Angeles each and every year I've been mayor."

The harshest exchanges of the night came as Hahn's challengers took aim at the ethics of his administration, with frequent allusions to investigations into whether there are any links between political contributions and the awarding of city contracts.

"I'm still waiting for him to take responsibility for the corruption in this administration," said City Councilman Antonio Villaraigosa at one point.

Hahn, who looked exasperated at his rivals' comments throughout the night, retorted testily: "What corruption?"

The mayor has not been accused of any wrongdoing, and no charges have been filed against his aides.

Councilman Bernard C. Parks, the former police chief, returned to the issue of integrity over and over again. "We should not as a community wake up every morning and read about the latest scandal about how our money has been misused," he said. "And we should not have a mayor that continues to deflect, defend and ignore and not act like he brought these people to city government."

On transportation, all the candidates pledged to fix the city's traffic congestion, with Hertzberg touting his plan to synchronize traffic lights and Villaraigosa and Hahn voicing support for an expansion of the Red Line subway to the Westside — a plan that would require a change in federal law.

Alarcon, Hahn and Hertzberg said they support full public financing of city elections,

while Parks and Villaraigosa called for further reforms of campaign finance rules but stopped short of endorsing such a measure.

"I think every one of us up here understands that the least favorite part of running for office is asking people for money," the mayor said.

Turning to jobs, the candidates offered a variety of ideas on how to help such economically struggling communities as Watts and Highland Park. Parks recalled his efforts to bring a National Football League team back to Los Angeles. He also spoke out against legislation that seeks to block construction of "big box" retail stores, such as Wal-Mart.

Villaraigosa vowed to steer public contracts to "local businesses in neighborhoods like Watts."

He also pledged to encourage pension funds to invest in communities that need help.

Hertzberg touted a solar energy company that he headed in South Los Angeles after leaving the Legislature. "I brought jobs to South L.A.," he said.

Hahn mentioned his approval of business tax cuts. He also said keeping the troubled Martin Luther King/Drew Medical Center from shutting down was important for the area's economy. "We have to save it, and that's why I've been outspoken about that," he said.

Alarcon invoked his service on the City Council, listing accomplishments such as neighborhood patrols to fight crime and empowerment zones to stimulate employment.