

Challengers aim attacks at Hahn

By Rick Orlov

Staff Writer

Monday, February 07, 2005 - Mayor James Hahn found himself on the defensive again Monday as four of his challengers stepped up their criticism of his administration in a spirited, and often hostile, televised debate.

About halfway through the 90-minute forum, Hahn remarked, "It feels like four against one in here."

It was the second live televised debate that included all the major candidates, who are all rolling up their sleeves for the final month of campaigning before the March 8 election. The forum was sponsored by the Citywide Alliance of Neighborhood Councils and television stations KCBS (Channel 2) and KCAL (Channel 9).

Hahn is facing strong challenges from Councilmen Bernard Parks and Antonio Villaraigosa, former Assembly Speaker Bob Hertzberg and state Sen. Richard Alarcon, D-Van Nuys.

Alarcon was the most aggressive during the session, drawing frequent applause from the audience of more than 600 members of 80 neighborhood councils throughout the city.

"This election is not just about ideas," Alarcon said. "It is about electing a mayor who will have the courage to stand up to the powerful money interests, the special interests that are destroying our neighborhoods.

"If I am elected, I will not let the special interests steal this city. We can turn L.A. around, but not if you continue to give it to them."

Hahn continued to defend his four years as mayor, fending off criticism of his efforts to hire more police officers, reduce crime, deal with traffic issues and his administration of the government.

"I am proud of what we have been able to accomplish," Hahn said, citing his efforts to reverse the loss of police officers that occurred before he took office, adding 40,000 jobs in the city and providing more access to residents through neighborhood councils.

"When I took office, we were down 800 officers. We now have 325 more," Hahn said. "Crime is down throughout the city. If we are going to build our communities, we have to make sure it is safe first."

Hahn, who refused to talk about his debate performance or his challengers, holds only a slight lead in independent public opinion polls over Villaraigosa, with Parks and Hertzberg closely following. Alarcon was far down in the survey.

Hahn drew often heated complaints over the ongoing investigations into his administration, ranging from "pay-to-play" allegations and overbilling by a public relations firm.

"We have yet to hear this mayor accept responsibility," Parks said. "He created an atmosphere of corruption. He is the most fined official in the history of the city Ethics Commission."

Villaraigosa, too, attacked the mayor for the series of investigations.

"This administration is the most investigated we have ever had," Villaraigosa said. "The district attorney, the U.S. attorney, the FBI, two grand juries. When will it stop?"

Alarcon said he was trying to bring light to what was going on in City Hall.

"I worked there for 16 years and I hate to see what's going on now," Alarcon said, saying he believes a lot of the problems could be dealt with by giving more authority to neighborhood councils.

"I don't know why we are afraid of neighborhood councils," Alarcon said. "They can't do any worse than the decisions that have been made. People don't trust City Hall. We can change that."

Hertzberg said he believed that the problems were due to a lack of leadership by the mayor.

A mayor needs to assert more authority to try to force a change in schools and develop broader economic policies, he said.

"This mayor has been asleep at the switch," Hertzberg said. "When I was head of the Economic Development Corp., it would make my stomach turn to see the loss of jobs in this city over the years.

"We need a mayor who wakes up and lives, breathes and thinks about how he can make this city better."