

CANDIDATES AGREE THAT CITY GOVERNMENT IS BROKEN

Los Angeles is called a sponge, sucking up taxpayer money. Elected officials and city employees need to be held accountable, candidates say.

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All six candidates at Forum sponsored by the Chatsworth Neighborhood Council. Credit

Six City Council candidates Wednesday agreed that Los Angeles needs to solve its budget deficit, empower local representation and create a business-friendly environment with less bureaucratic red tape.

They repeatedly said city government was broken and city employees and elected officials needed to be accountable for their decisions.

There was little discord on the issues. Heads nodded in agreement and there was some gentle joshing. Each wants to succeed retiring [District 12](#) City Councilman Greig Smith.

They met in a two-hour open forum at Lawrence Middle School. It was their first joint public appearance, hosted by the [Chatsworth Neighborhood Council](#).

The candidates, as they appear on the ballot are:

- [Dinesh "Danny" Lakharpal](#), a businessman
- [Kelly M. Lord Jr.](#), a small business owner
- [Brad Smith](#), a Neighborhood Council board member
- [Navrai "Singh" Singh](#), a businessman/restaurant owner
- [Armineh Chelebian](#), a Neighborhood Council board member
- [Mitch Englander](#), a policeman and councilman deputy

Candidates fielded questions before a crowd of about 120. Topics included preserving Chatsworth's rural, horse-keeping community; beautifying neighborhoods; getting a handle on the city's overall budget deficit; and stimulating new business. They tended to agree on each issue.

But their styles differed.

Council candidate [Mitch Englander](#), who appeared to have the strongest ties to the Chatsworth community, touted his work in the community as the chief of staff for outgoing Councilman Greig Smith.

[Dinesh "Danny" Lakhanpal](#) said he's been a business owner in Chatsworth for decades.

[Armineh Chelebian](#) and [Kelly M. Lord Jr.](#) said they shop in Chatsworth and [Brad Smith](#) said he married a Chatsworth girl.

Holding elected officials and city employees accountable to the citizenry was a top concern.

All of the candidates agreed business taxes were high in Los Angeles and government should be there to help business growth, not hinder it.

However, most of the candidates weren't kind to current government officials.

Englander, who as chief of staff follows a line of succession leading back to former Councilman Hal Bernson, didn't bad-mouth the system. Instead, he talked about eliminating needless departments and creating an economic development department that could prove beneficial to economic growth.

Smith, a manager at a civil engineering firm, said no one can save Los Angeles but Angelenos themselves. "Let's roll up our sleeves and get it done," Smith said.

Chelebian, the only female candidate, said Los Angeles government was like a sponge, sucking up taxpayer money.

Lord encouraged residents to stay engaged in local politics and decision-making. "No more age of entitlement, no more age of ultimatums," Lord said. "Raising taxes is a [City Hall] culture downtown. We have to take over."

None of the candidates supported raising taxes or fees. They agreed wasteful spending was a major problem as well as the burden of paying pension benefits. The result is reflected in the city's growing budget deficit.

All of the candidates said they would support the voices of neighborhood councils.

"Neighborhood councils are the solutions and should be at the decision-making table," Smith said.

Lord said the neighborhood council "is" the government and [Singh](#) and Chelebian said neighborhood councils are an integral part of community representation.

Chelebian said if elected she would take neighborhood councils out of an advisory role and move them into a policy-making role.

All agreed that community beautification was an important quality-of-life issue in Chatsworth and surrounding areas.

Smith encouraged neighborhood councils to grab opportunities to apply for federal and state grants to supplement beautification and cleanup projects that city employees bypass.

Englander, who is also a reserve Los Angeles police officer, leads the candidates in donations.

His financial coffers bulge with \$400,303 in contributions reported through Sept. 30, according to the Los Angeles City Ethics Commission.

Smith, a Neighborhood Council board member, follows at a distant second with \$4,285, while fellow board member Chelebian collected \$3,615 and business owner Lakhanpal drummed up \$1,801 in financial contributions.

The remaining two candidates, Lord, a small business owner and board member of the Northridge East Neighborhood Council, and Singh, an owner of 18 Indian restaurants throughout Los Angeles, reported zero contributions as of Sept. 30.

Council candidates will appear for a second time at a 6 p.m. reception and a 7 p.m. forum on Jan. 31 at the Senior Activities Center, 10100 Balboa Blvd., Granada Hills. That gathering will be sponsored by District 12 neighborhood councils.

The primary election is March 8, with a runoff scheduled for May 17 if no candidate wins a majority of the vote.

Seven out of 15 Los Angeles City Council district seats are up for election.