

INFORMING VOTERS AUSTIN COUNCIL DISTRICT 4

District 4 candidates Casar, Herrin provide contrasting views at forum

By Elizabeth Findell efindell@statesman.com



District 4 Council Member Greg Casar (left) and challenger Louis Herrin spoke at the first of five candidate forums Thursday.



"We have people who just want to be homeless and ... some people may not like this ... we need to tell them to hit the road and find someplace else."

Asked to name an issue that's particularly affecting North Austin residents, City Council hopeful Louis Herrin called for a tougher stance on homelessness.

"There are some that are mentally ill, and we need to force the state to be responsible for that," he said.

Herrin, who is challenging District 4 Council Member Greg Casar, painted a picture Thursday evening of a city where problems are increasing — noting that he moved here more than 20 years ago, in part, because there was no traffic.

Casar, on the other hand, agreed that Austin has

challenges, but he spoke positively of initiatives during his nearly two years in office that he called steps in the right direction. He pointed to a lack of parks as particularly important to the North Austin district and rattled off several park projects underway.

The third candidate for the seat, Gonzalo Camacho, didn't attend the Thursday night candidate forum. The League of Women Voters hosted it as the first of five candidate forums before the City Council election Nov. 8.

Casar, 27, won the District 4 seat in late 2014 after quitting his job as a political director at the Workers Defense Project. Herrin, 60, an engineer, said his fiscal conservatism and technical expertise made him a problem-solver the city needs. He was among eight candidates to run for the seat in 2014 and received less than 3 percent of the vote.

Among the highlights from the Herrin and Casar forum:

›Casar backed the \$720 million mobility bond package going before voters as a key first step in addressing Austin's transportation problems. Herrin called transportation one of his top priorities, but said the bond package was "a Band-Aid" approach he wouldn't support.

›Asked about Austin's booming technology industry and its role in city affordability issues, Herrin emphasized the importance of improving education to prepare a local workforce. Casar said Austin needs to find a way to spread technology wealth throughout the community, perhaps by persuading state legislators to increase minimum wages.

› Two years on the council have taught Casar the importance of land use issues, he said, and how city policies can drive people out of the city. He supports changes through the city's CodeNEXT program to increase neighborhood density in certain areas. Herrin is skeptical of small houses with too little parking and doesn't support CodeNEXT overall, he said.

›Neither candidate is a fan of billboards — digital or otherwise. In response to a question from Scenic Austin, which was looking for support to rid the city of billboards, Herrin agreed they're an eyesore he could do without. Casar noted that there are public safety pros and cons to digital billboards, but said he generally supported phasing out billboards.

As the new 11-member City Council took office in January 2015, Casar was among the five members who drew an initial two-year term in order to stagger future election cycles. The winners of the November election will serve four-year terms.

Contact Elizabeth Findell at 512-445-3696.

Twitter: @efindell