

Jockeying for position

The four Republican candidates vying for the District 7 Senate seat voice their opinions at North Houston forum

By Greg Densmore
Editor

The four Republican candidates vying for the open District 7 Senate seat brought their candidacies to Greenspoint last week to take part in a Candidate Forum hosted by the North Houston Association.

The Jan. 24 breakfast event held at the Houston Marriott North drew a crowd of movers and shakers that included CEOs, chamber heads, bankers, lawyers, engineers and educators.

Each of the four GOP candidates — former Houston city councilman Mark Ellis, State Rep. Peggy Hamric, State Rep. Joe Nixon and radio personality Dan Patrick — tried to convince the roomful of business and civic leaders why they should be the one who replaces the retiring Jon Lindsay.

The four will face-off in the March 7 primary, with the winner to face Democratic candidate F. Michael Kubosh in November.

It was clear from the prevent buzz that most in the room were disappointed that Lindsay — who is also the president of the NHA — was stepping down.

“I really hate to lose him,” said one businessman. “He did a great job.”

Another said he didn’t feel there was a clear favorite among the four Republican candidates vying for the District 7 slot.

“I’d really like to take a little something from all of them and make my own senator,” he said.

Those expecting fireworks at the Jan. 24 breakfast forum were disappointed, though at one point Nixon did chide Patrick for “mischaracterizing” the voting records of himself and Hamric. Other than this slight harangue — prompted by a challenge from audience member Jack Drake for the

candidates “to disagree with each other” — the candidates steered clear of verbal fisticuffs and agreed on most issues. They varied some on how to solve regional problems, however.

First came the candidates’ opening statements.

If elected to the Senate 7 post, Hamric — who has been endorsed by Lindsay — said she would push for prudent fiscal management of schools, safer neighborhoods, border security and more economic development opportunities to strengthen the business climate.

Nixon touted his accomplishment as a state representative in helping to author bills that protect doctors and the business community from frivolous lawsuits, as well as measures that cap property appraisals.

Ellis pointed to his fiscal management experience during his six years on the Houston city council, his time spent on the Houston-Galveston Area Council and his working relationships with those in the North Houston community.

Patrick tried to distance himself from the other candidates, first speaking of the “disconnect with the people in this room” and the politicians in Austin, and then promising to get school spending under control, stop illegal immigration and rein in government spending, if elected.

After opening statements, moderator Joe Adams, NHA’s board chairman, took the podium to quiz the candidates on a number of hot-button issues that included illegal immigration, property tax relief/school finance and the Grand Parkway highway project.

Adams asked if the candidates supported the guest worker program currently in place and stricter enforcement of the immigration laws — and if so, how do we fund such programs?

“No, we don’t need stricter enforcement; we just need to enforce current laws,” said Nixon.

“Illegal immigrants stay here because the State of Texas allows them to,” he added. “More people are landing in our airports than are crossing our border.”

More state and federal funding needs to be funneled to local sheriff departments on the border, said Nixon.

Hamric said she does not support the guest worker program.

“I don’t support anything that helps people break the law,” she said.

Hamric feels the government needs to designate “high-threat areas” along the border and then give the respective border officials Homeland Security funds to fight illegal immigration.

Patrick said it’s obvious that the federal government is not coming to the aid of border states affected by illegal immigration. He said he would make stopping illegal immigration one of his priorities.

“We’ve got to have the moral courage to stop illegal aliens from coming,” he said. “Our sheriffs are under siege. We’ve had 12 mosques spring up along our border. Terrorists are at our back door. If the federal government is not going to help, Texas must do it on its own.”

Ellis said the illegal immigration problem is a “huge” issue, costing Texas \$5 billion a year in increased costs for medical, school, police and social services.

“There should be no amnesty program,” said Ellis, a vocal opponent of illegal immigration while a Houston council member. “We need to guard our borders and police the illegal immigrants that are here. This is not a simple issue, but rather a complex problem that needs to be addressed.”

Adams’ next question was

on property tax relief and school finance.

“If we reduce taxes that go to education, how do we replace them?” he asked.

Patrick said there was plenty of money available now to replace reduced school property taxes.

“We’re awash with money in Austin, but there’s tremendous waste in our education budget,” he said.

Patrick said a statewide audit of Texas school districts is needed to determine the source of wasteful spending.

Nixon said he and other House members had passed legislation that cut school spending and required schools to follow uniform accounting principles, but the measures “died” in the Senate.

“We did everything you want us to do,” he said. “We lowered taxes by one-third and capped appraisals at 3 percent. We are doing the hard work you want us to do.”

Ellis said he would ensure that school districts were spending their tax dollars effectively and operating under a uniform accounting system. He also pledged to work for a fair and equitable tax for businesses.

However, he warned that when a particular budget is decreased, “you’re going to have to make up the difference somewhere.”

Hamric agreed that the current school financing system was unfair. She said she voted against the Robin Hood plan because it takes money from financially-sound districts to fund poorer districts.

“We have to change the system, but I’m not for gutting it,” she said.

Hamric favors having one “low-rate, broad-based system that everybody pays in to.”

Noting that traffic congestion was a key issue in north Houston, Adams next asked the candidates to state their stance on the Grand Parkway

extension, and particularly on Segment F-2, which is designed to run through some areas of Spring.

Ellis said the Grand Parkway is a necessity, but that he doesn’t support a plan that will harm neighborhoods.

“We have to be cautious in how we develop it,” said Ellis. “We can’t gut neighborhoods; we have to move forward in proper fashion.”

Hamric said it was inevitable that the highway will be built. She noted the opposition to the project, and put much of the blame on the controversy on the shoulders of developers.

“Over the years, they have built homes in the right-of-way,” she said.

Hamric praised the efforts of the Texas Department of Transportation in its planning of the Grand Parkway.

“TxDOT has really studied this and the current plan has less opposition,” she said. “If we have to go through some neighborhoods, there are steps to take to lessen the impact,” such as putting up sound walls and landscaping.

Nixon said he favors building the Grand Parkway to help alleviate traffic congestion. He said those residents who live near the route and oppose the project should have seen this day coming — given the fact that the route had been decided upon many years ago.

“Mobility issues need public input,” he said. “We need to find common-sense solutions and stick to them.”

“We obviously need it,” Patrick said. “Tomball needs it, Katy and The Woodlands need it. But maybe not Spring, because it’s going through their backyard.”

The original plan for the Grand Parkway is not the best solution, said Patrick.

“We need to route it up (FM) 1488 and connect it to (State Highway) 242,” he said. “That would impact fewer people and not run it through the middle of someone’s neighborhood.”