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DISTRICTS 1, 3 election is March 14

A homeless man, mumbling about a government conspiracy, urinates in a downtown alley at lunchtime. He could be the responsibility of the city police, a homeless shelter or a mental health system.

And if he’s been in Gallup any length of time, he’s been shuttled among all three.

That was the consensus at a political forum held March 1 at the Gallup-McKinley County Chamber of Commerce where candidates for two council seats introduced themselves and their platforms to the public.

District 3 incumbent councilman Yogash Kumar and challengers Angela Chavez and Esco Chavez and Linda Garcia of District 1 squared off in a 90-minute question-and-answer session to give the public a better idea of who’s in the race.

“I want to finish the job that I started,” Garcia said.

A Gallup native and retired municipal employee, Garcia is unopposed in the March 14 election. “Vote for me,” she said jokingly.

The forum was sponsored by the Gallup Independent and KGLP radio station and moderated by representatives from both outlets.

One of the questions posed to candidates dealt with Gallup's chronic substance abuse problem. The city consistently carries one of New Mexico's highest DWI arrest rates.

"We need to teach our kids about the dangers of substance abuse," Esco Chavez, also a Gallup native and a retired city of Gallup employee, said. "We have to look at what the Giants (retailers) are doing. Who's going to fight Giant?"

In what specific ways would the candidates address the problem of panhandling was another question. That might be Gallup's second most notorious problem, some public officials have said.

"We have an ordinance on aggressive panhandling," Garcia said. "We have to work with the police department and other agencies like NCI to get rid of it."

"It's the biggest problem with people of my district," Angela Chavez, the owner and operator of Angela's Café along West Historic Highway 66, said. "My place of work is a hub for tourism. I think we can get together and find creative solutions."

Asked about making downtown a better and more attractive place, particularly for tourists, Kumar, a local hotelier, noted the city's recent passage of a tax increment finance package and encouraged the continued working relationship with the Greater Gallup Economic Development Corporation and the Business Improvement District.

Kumar suggested the putting up of signage to curb panhandling at Gallup's private establishments like Safeway.

"Where people get hit up are at the private places," Kumar said of panhandling. "We have to

encourage signage. Perhaps a memorandum of understanding with the city would be appropriate. We have to do more to limit access to the businesses."

Gallup city councilors serve four-year staggered terms and earn an annual salary of $15,000.

"It was a good way to find out how these people stand on the issues," Sandra Worthington, 32, a newcomer to Gallup from Maine said after the forum. "I'm only here for six months, so I don't think I'll have a chance to actually vote."

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