

Final council debate features audience outbursts, political jabs

By Joe Ferguson Arizona Daily Star

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The final debate between the five Tucson City Council candidates was again marred by infighting between the candidate and outbursts from the audience.

The debate Wednesday night at the YWCA, 525 N. Bonita Ave., featured candidates Paul Durham and Gary Watson, running for the open seat in Ward 3, and Councilman Steve Kozachik and challengers Mariano Rodriguez and Mike Cease in Ward 6.

The forum was interrupted about an hour into the event when a man in the audience shouted to Kozachik to “shut up” and let Watson finish his answer.

At the time, Kozachik was whispering in the ear of Durham, the Democratic candidate running against Watson.

The room — including Watson — fell silent as the man complained. “He has interrupted five times now,” the man yelled about Kozachik.

The moderator from the League of Women Voters of Greater Tucson regained control of the debate, but it would repeatedly fall apart as candidates sidestepped questions to lob political attacks at their opponents as well as another audience member loudly scolding Kozachik.

Kozachik never responded to the outbursts from the crowd.

The largest back and forth was between Ward 6 candidates Kozachik, a Democrat, and architect Rodriguez, a Republican.

The exchanges included arguing over wait times for the bus, funding strategies for the police department and what is common sense gun regulations.

The latter had Rodriguez offering up a hypothetical scenario of a man taking an Uber home from the bar, going to bed and then waking up to find an intruder in his home, and using a gun to protect his family.

“He did everything right,” Rodriguez said. “Those are the small little things that we need to look at when the city makes these types of laws.”

Kozachik responded that Rodriguez was not talking about a hypothetical scenario, saying there was a Tucson woman who was shot and killed after her boyfriend came home from a bar drunk.

The City Council passed an ordinance in 2013 that allows police to subject a person who negligently discharges a gun and appears intoxicated to either a blood or breath test. It was named after a woman who was fatally shot by her boyfriend who told police he drank several beers before handling a gun. The county attorney’s office ruled it an accidental shooting.

“That is not something hypothetical. We need to get justice,” Kozachik said.

The pair also fought over priorities, with Rodriguez telling the audience there is no accountability at City Hall. Rodriguez added the city doesn’t pay its police officers enough and that it has lost dozens of officers to other communities just since he announced he would run for City Council.

Kozachik cited from memory the amount of funding the city has set aside annually for the police department, saying roughly one-third of the city’s budget goes to law enforcement.

He was critical of Rodriguez and Watson regarding their comments about law enforcement, saying that Police Chief Chris Magnus told him recently that even wealthy cities in Arizona like Scottsdale are struggling to hire new officers.

Green Party candidate Cease used his time to refer back to his “Green New Deal for Tucson,” a program that would establish a revolving fund to offer low-interest loans to residents to make their homes more energy-efficient as well as compatible with solar panels.

In the Ward 3 race, Durham and Watson occasionally clashed.

At one point, Watson offered to let Durham answer his questions — saying his Democratic opponent was eager to label him.

On guns, both men said they supported gun control reform but what that meant differed.

Durham offered a full-throated defense of the city’s now-discontinued policy to destroy seized firearms and the decision to fight the state in court when it was challenged by state Rep. Mark Finchem of Oro Valley.

The city ultimately lost the fight and had to pay for the state’s legal costs.

Durham was quick to support Kozachik’s proposed ban of bump-stocks, the accessory used by the Las Vegas shooter that helped turn several rifles essentially into machine guns.

Even if that policy is enacted it will likely be challenged by the state.

“We have to defend home rule; my opponent calls that a waste of money,” Durham said.

Watson, running as an independent, said he applauded Kozachik for the gun buyback effort he spearheaded several years ago, but that gun control is a federal issue.

There are some gun control issues that deserve another look by Congress, he said, but the city cannot afford to have another legal fight with the state over guns.

“We need to look at treating guns the same way we look at cars,” said Watson.

The Nov. 7 general election allows Tucson voters citywide to decide the winner in each of the three wards up for a vote. The Ward 5 race is uncontested with incumbent Councilman Richard Fimbres the only candidate.

Ballots for the largely mail-in election should arrive this week to the homes of registered voters.