

Candidates for Solis seat face off

By Rebecca Kimitch, Staff Writer
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Immigration issues dominated the agenda when three of the leading Democratic candidates to replace new Labor Secretary Hilda Solis met face to face for the first time at a forum Thursday night.

The focus was no surprise, given the sponsors: the Southwest Voter Registration Project, which mobilizes voter participation among Latinos and other minorities, and the Latino Professional Network.

"Can we expect you to stand tall and firm on the defining issues of the most vulnerable constituencies of the 32nd Congressional District, and the nation, such as fair and humane immigration reform, driver's license reform, border militarization, immigration raids and separation of families, immigrant students' access to education and financial aid?" asked Nativio Lopez, president of the Mexican American Political Association, in one of three predetermined questions posed to the candidates.

Though the candidates - state Sen. Gil Cedillo, Board of Equalization Chairwoman Judy Chu, and Emanuel Pleitez, a former member of President Obama's transition team - did not directly respond to all of Lopez's questions, throughout the event they were quick to boast of past efforts on behalf of immigrants and pledge to push immigration reform.

"Today I met with the president ... I could have said anything ... what I said was, 'Mr. President, please stop the raids. Please stop the raids now,' " Cedillo said of a meeting with Barack Obama during the president's town hall meeting in Los Angeles on Thursday.

Cedillo is known for repeatedly introducing legislation to allow undocumented immigrants to obtain drivers licenses, but he said that his legacy goes far beyond: "In 11 years of the legislature ... I have written 80 bills signed by three governors. I have fought to defend immigrants, because I believe it is the right thing to do."

Chu discussed being raised by an immigrant mother in South Central Los

Angeles, fighting against an English- only movement in Monterey Park, and pushing legislation in Sacramento to protect outdoor migrant workers and require contracts negotiated in a certain language to be printed in that language.

"I support bills that will bring justice to immigrants. Many times immigrants do not have a voice in the political system, and it is up to us, who are in elected positions, to be able to speak up for them," she said.

Pleitez, too, was born to an immigrant mother, who crossed the border from Mexico while pregnant with him. He said his childhood growing up at the "mercy of the generosity of the people of my community" in back rooms and back garages of neighbors created a debt that he owes to the district.

"I was able to move on to Stanford University, Goldman Sachs ... but I will never forget ... this debt that I have," he said.

"I will leverage my youth to organize around the country ... to really pass immigration reform."

A question about health care reform asked not only about the candidates' priorities but how they would "ensure that every individual is covered, regardless of their immigration status."

Chu said she would increase funding for community clinics, which she said are key to serving immigrant needs. Cedillo said he wouldn't vote "for any health care delivery system ... that didn't include immigrants, regardless of immigration status."

And Pleitez said immigrants should be put on a path to citizenship to be able to take advantage of a future universal health care system.

The fact that all the candidates support universal health care was taken as a given. In terms of many policies, they are on the same page. They all pledged support for homosexual marriage, increased services for veterans, and the DREAM Act, which would allow undocumented immigrant students of good moral character to apply for conditional residency.

The forum's atmosphere was a friendly one. Several hundred young and old professionals mingled with glasses of wine before the political discussion, and afterward a DJ spun music while the crowd spilled out onto the patio of the Los Angeles River Center and Gardens.

Though many people in the audience had already picked their candidate,

they seemed to share their cheers and applause with all three candidates.

Audience member Francisco Barragan said he was impressed with all the candidates, though he came supporting one in particular.

"They are all public servants in one way or another," he said.

The sponsoring organization is planning additional forums for the Republican, Libertarian and other Democratic candidates who did not participate in Thursday's forum.

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