

KICKING OFF BATTLE FOR DISTRICT 12

Candidates vying for Greig Smith's open council seat begin race

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Posted: 01/06/2011 05:33:17 PM PST

Updated: 02/09/2011 05:04:27 PM PST



Candidates for the Chatsworth City Council 12th District seat, from left, Brad Smith, Armineh Chelebian, Mitchell Englander, Dinesh Lakhampal, Navraj Singh and Kelly M. Lord Jr. participate in a friendly debate Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2011, on issues ranging from local business growth to the protection of the natural environment in the community during the Chatsworth Neighborhood Council meeting at Lawrence Middle School in Chatsworth, Calif. (Ernesto Elizarraraz/ LA Daily News)



Mitchell Englander (Ernesto Elizarraraz/LA Daily News)



CHATSWORTH - The campaign for the only open seat in the 2011 Los Angeles City Council elections began Wednesday night with candidates trying to outdo each other in their loathing of business taxes and love of horses.

The occasion was a public question-and-answer session - put on by the Chatsworth Neighborhood Council - that marked the first joint appearance by the five men and one woman vying to succeed retiring City Councilman Greig Smith as representative of District 12 in the northwest San Fernando Valley.

In the order they'll appear on the March 8 ballot, they are engineer Dinesh "Danny" Lakhampal, real-estate agency owner Kelly M. Lord Jr., business development specialist Brad Smith, restaurateur Navraj "Singh"



Dinesh Lakhampal is one of the six candidates running for the City Council 12th District seat. (Ernesto Elizarraraz/LA Daily News)

Singh, accountant Armineh Chelebian, and Greig Smith's chief of staff Mitchell Englander.

Several emphasized their affinity for horses after a woman in the audience of about 100 in the Lawrence Middle School library asked how the candidates would protect horse owners' lots and Chatsworth's historically rural lifestyle from land developers, the kind of local-control issue that's big in the area.

"I'm absolutely committed to keeping horse-keeping in Chatsworth," Englander said, promising to seek neighborhood-council input on land-use matters.

Singh pointed out that he used to play polo.

"I love horses. I love horse lovers," Singh said, adding that "no builder will be able to buy my vote."

Brad Smith would not be topped.

Promising to protect the character of individual neighborhoods, Smith said of his own family: "We're all about horses, as you can imagine. We ride on a regular basis."

The tone was polite at the nearly two-hour forum. Englander, whose \$400,303 in contributions through September leads all candidates in this year's City Council races, wasn't directly confronted by his opponents.

Brad Smith (no relation to Greig Smith), a distant second in District 12 fundraising with \$4,285 through September, acknowledged in an interview that Englander is the frontrunner.

"I know it's a long shot (to win outright), but we might be able to force him into a runoff, and that alone would be a watershed in this city," Smith said.

Runoffs would be May 17 in races where no candidate gets a majority of votes on March 8. Seven of the 15 City Council seats and four of the seven school-board seats are at stake, in addition to ballot measures.

Brad Smith, a former Daily News reporter, said he hopes to break what he calls an "undemocratic" line of succession in District 12. Greig Smith was Hal Bernson's chief of staff before winning Bernson's office in 2003.

Four of the candidates are Republican (Englander, Singh, Chelebian and Lord). Three are active in neighborhood councils (Chelebian in Winnetka, Lord in Northridge East, and Smith in Granada Hills South). Two have run for office before (Chelebian has sought City Council and Assembly seats four times before this, and was the 2008 Republican nominee in the 40th Assembly District, while Singh has run for the House of Representatives twice, and was the 2008 GOP nominee in the 27th Congressional District).

When the candidates introduced themselves to the audience, Englander emphasized his work as an LAPD reserve officer but didn't mention his staff position at City Hall.

Little difference on issues was evident as candidates took turns with questioners blasting city government as bloated, out of touch with residents, and unfriendly to business.

Englander proposed cutting the city's budget deficit by eliminating less-essential departments. Chelebian said she would have a deputy dedicated to helping businesses. Lakhanpal, Singh and Lord said they would cut or redirect business taxes.

Lord compared overspenders at City Hall to patients at a psychiatric hospital, saying the ones who "dropped their denial" recovered quickest.

Smith boomed that Los Angeles "can do a hell of a lot better" considering the region's natural advantages.

Each candidate lavished praise on neighborhood councils, Chelebian going so far as saying they should be allowed to weigh in on citywide issues by collectively casting a 16th vote in the City Council.

A second forum with the same candidates is scheduled Jan. 31, at 7 p.m., at the Senior Activities Center in Granada Hills.