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## Youths sound off to Sacramento mayoral candidates

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They're not interested in hearing about the Kings arena, downtown revitalization or gay marriage. They don't want to talk about more cops on the streets – at least not as the only suggested answer to rising youth violence.

What Sacramento's youth want to know is how the next mayor is going to invest in them.

"There are more important things to talk about" than what teens often hear from the mayoral candidates, 14-year-old Bria Taylor said in an interview last week. "There are youth who are struggling every single day."

Taylor, a freshman at Kennedy High School, is one of a dozen or so Sacramento teenagers who organized a mayoral forum Monday night with Sacramento Area Congregations Together and the Meadowview Partnership.

She and her peers know of the struggles today's youth endure in some of the city's toughest neighborhoods. Some have been taken from parents, shuffled among foster homes and driven to seek refuge in street gangs. Some have had sex by the age of 12. They've counseled 17-year-old friends, pregnant for the third time, and watched kids raise kids.

They've raged – without feeling like they've been heard. Now, they've inserted themselves in the campaign agenda.

"We feel youth should be the priority," said 18-year-old Shuntae Campbell, one of the forum's organizers. "We're tomorrow, we're 10 years from now. We're the next generation."

More than a thousand people packed Luther Burbank High School's auditorium for Monday night's forum, where candidates answered five questions about youth problems, such as a lack of job opportunities and the high dropout rate.

Three of the four candidates present pledged to committing at least 40 percent of the city's proposed public safety tax measure to youth violence prevention and intervention services.

Mayor Heather Fargo, Leonard Padilla and Shawn Eldredge supported the commitment, while Muriel Strand did not.

The same three supported the county sales tax measure proposed to fund gang prevention and intervention.

Two other candidates, Kevin Johnson and Richard Jones, did not attend.

Most of the forum focused not on the candidates, but on what youths want to see from them. A video, several student testimonies and thunderous applause emphasized the organizers' underlying goal: That youth be heard.

Organizers shaped the forum based on surveys circulated among students at south-area high schools and community colleges. They received more than 250 responses, helping them determine what issues resonate most with Sacramento's youth.

Several themes emerged: Children should to be counseled, not jailed. They need alternatives to gangs. Foster children ought to be better supported while in the system and after they leave it.

"Being a youth is really hard," Campbell said. "I don't think people really understand how hard it is."

Campbell knows how difficult it is to resist the lure of the streets. He "grew up" in gang life, he said, and remembers pledging allegiance to a gang by the time he was 11.

Without a father at home, Campbell said, he looked to his fellow gang members to teach him how to be a man.

"If things are going bad at home," he said, "you look at them like family."

Campbell said he has left that life and is now trying to keep other youth from taking the same route. He said he hopes Sacramento's next mayor will commit to such advocacy, too.


The young organizers said they recognize their pet issues are hard to solve. The problems are tangled, difficult to separate and almost always stemming from troubles at home – a realm difficult for many politicians to reach. But they said that together, city leaders, community members and young people can keep the problems from getting worse, and maybe even make some progress.

"There is a lot of pressure on the family – and sometimes the family are the kids themselves," said Alli Swan, an ACT organizer. "How do we, as a city, step up? We can point the finger at the family, or we, as a community, can step up and play our part."

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