

District attorney candidates field the questions with ease

District attorney

By **MAY WONG**

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SANTA CRUZ — Tuesday was the eve of judgment for eight candidates vying to become the county's next district attorney. And everyone was on their best behavior.

All of them being lawyers, it was no problem for any of them to present their cases. Only this time, they weren't arguing on anyone else's behalf. Their own futures were on the line.

In the first four hours of the public hearing before the Board of Supervisors, the candidates had proven there wasn't any question they couldn't answer.

A few audience members interviewed afterward said they did not believe any of the candidates' performances damaged their chances of winning an appointment when the board makes it pick Thursday.

"It's a very impressive group," said John Frye, a Burlingame civil lawyer and supporter of former District Attorney Peter Chang.

Side by side the candidates sat, across a long table stretched before the board. All were dressed professionally.

All the candidates had apparently done their homework. At various times, each hopeful discussed what improvements he or she would bring to the office.

There was a good deal of name-

dropping as well, with some candidates laying out which officials they've spoken with to assess either the state of the District Attorney's Office, its budget or its programs.

Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt said she was particularly impressed with how Ron Ruiz, a San Jose defense lawyer and "outsider" candidate, and former District Attorney Chang seemed to be up to speed with issues in the office.

The candidates' supply of ideas were not lacking at all. It impressed board Chairman Jeff Almquist, who welcomed "competing ideas." "We've had a difficult time getting ideas out of that office for the past two years," he said.

But the real challenge will be, as some candidates stressed, how to get the money and resources to bring those ideas to fruition.

Carol Grivetz, the county's co-acting chief administrative officer, took notes to tabulate what the new and expanded programs would cost. The answer: a lot more than the county can afford.

After supervisors questioned the candidates, asking their opinions on topics ranging from the role of the district attorney to the handling of gang, juvenile, welfare fraud and child support cases, about 30 members of the public told the board which candidate they endorsed.

A majority of the speakers were victims or relatives of crime victims

who supported the candidacy of the various prosecutors who had tried their cases. They described their difficult experiences and attested to the compassion and skill the prosecutors had shown.

Several prosecutors and support staff members working in the District Attorney's Office urged the board to pick Canlis, the county's acting district attorney. Since joining the office, Canlis "quickly became the go-to person in the office," said Nancy Nielsen, a senior legal secretary in the office. "She became our de facto chief deputy long before she held the title."

Chang had the endorsement of several former prosecutors and staff members who worked under him while he was district attorney in the late '60s and early '70s.

"There are great prosecutors and great administrators. He's both," said Richard Verbrugge, former chief of DA inspectors. Verbrugge had worked under four district attorneys and said Chang was the best.

Donald Dietrich, president of the Deputy Sheriff's Association, did not endorse any one candidate, but told the supervisors the organization felt it was "crucial" the board pick someone from within the office to run it.

Only one speaker told the supervisors they needed to choose an outsider.