

DA candidates, inside-out

Aspirants work both sides of the fence during marathon questioning

District attorney
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SANTA CRUZ — The insider vs. outsider theme was cranked up to high volume Tuesday by candidates for the district attorney's job who lined up for a group interview session before the Board of Supervisors.

The candidates were "insiders" when it came to knowing what the office needs to improve, but "outsiders" when it came to taking blame for problems in the office.

And, with a few exceptions, they

■ *Job-seekers handle the interviews without a hitch — Back page*

turned on "outsider" Ron Ruiz, a San Jose defense attorney who has been rumored to be the front runner among the eight candidates for the appointment.

The forum before the supervisors was a prelude to the appointment the board will make Thursday to fill the job left by Art Danner, the former district attorney who was appointed to the

bench in December.

The contest to become DA has been intense from the beginning — the forum was a reflection of that.

The board chamber was packed. For the first time, the entire board proceedings were televised live — a grueling session that started at 1:30 p.m. and lasted until about 10:30 p.m. Extra television monitors were put in the hall and the basement cafeteria for people who couldn't get in the chamber.

Please see INTERVIEWS — BACK PAGE

2-10-99
DA hopefuls (back row, from left) Bob Lee, Christine McGuire, Ariadne Symons, Jon Hopkins, Kate Canlis and Peter Chang watch fellow candidate Ron Ruiz address the Board of Supervisors Tuesday. Ed Frey, the eighth candidate, sat in another row.



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Interviews

Continued from Page A1

Victims of crime, mothers and fathers of candidates, friends and other lawyers came to support their candidate. Several times, well seasoned trial attorneys who have appeared before dozens of juries croaked with nervousness. They also joked: "Hi Dad," quipped Ariadne Symons to Supervisor Walt Symons. For the record: there is no relationship between them.

It was an opportunity for the supervisors to question the candidates, for the candidates to pitch themselves, for the public to say what they want in a district attorney and for the candidates to detail what they think is wrong with the office.

Ruiz, a Santa Cruz County resident whose criminal-defense practice is in San Jose, took heat from other contenders because of his background in defense law.

"To lead a prosecutor's office, you have to be a prosecutor," insisted Assistant District Attorney Christine McGuire. The office needs "a leader who knows what it's like to be in prosecutors' trenches."

"Career prosecutors are just different from other lawyers," agreed Kate Canlis, the acting district attorney.

Ruiz shot back that the office has an "us against them" mentality regarding other government agencies; "an insular mentality," a "bulldog mentality." He had been told of divisiveness and back-biting in the office and was warned there were rumors being spread about him being a "carpetbagger."

"I scoffed at it," he said. Then, a press release from two gang prosecutors was released questioning Ruiz's ability to prosecute gang members because he had defended a leader of the Nuestra Familia prison gang. Ruiz said the incident "symbolizes what's been going on in that office."

"I don't want to glorify myself on the ugliness of what's there."

Canlis defended the press release, written by her supporters. The issue wasn't Ruiz's integrity, but "how the public confidence is affected," she said.

While portraying Ruiz as an outsider, most of the candidates also carefully distanced themselves from the office. McGuire characterized herself as being an insider, but "outside the creation of the current problems."

"I'm the best of both worlds — an insider and an outsider," Symons declared. "I've been here long enough to know the problem but not become part of it."

Jon Hopkins, a chief deputy who was fired by Danner to make way for Canlis to be acting district attorney, maintained that he was "not involved in the direction of the office." "My part in what is there now is non-existent," he said.

"I'm the breath of fresh air from inside the office," said Bob Lee, an assistant district attorney.

Supervisors asked the candidates whether they would prosecute medical marijuana cases, how to improve morale in the office, why welfare fraud cases are prosecuted as felonies, their opinions on the family support division and whether being an illegal immigrant should make a difference in prosecution.

The attorneys offered scores of ideas of what they would do if appointed. They also offered their analyses of what's wrong now, especially with juvenile justice.

Several applicants said they felt juveniles were being "overcharged" with more serious crimes than they should be by the District Attorney's Office.

"When you've got that many kids locked up, yes, there are too many filings," Ruiz said.

Latinos are under-represented among attorneys in the office, and over-represented among the jail population, especially in Juvenile Hall, they said. "Why the DA's office, out of 38 (assistant district attorneys) doesn't have a cultural Hispanic when it should probably have five, I don't know," Peter Chang, a former district attorney, said.

About 90 percent of the inmates at Juvenile Hall are Latino, Ruiz said. "You cannot live in this county and see that and not want to change it," he said.

Court services are also lacking in South County, candidates agreed. Attorneys' caseloads in the office are "unbalanced," Canlis said, and big cases are not rotated among attorneys.

Attorneys feel they have very little opportunity to advance and no career track, said McGuire. "I can't recall the last time we asked people what they want to do, and I think that's important," she said.

Jack-in-the-Box offers more management training than the District Attorney's Office, Lee said.

Ruiz said several police chiefs told him there was a breakdown in communications from the office and that their officers were not treated respectfully.

Lee maintained that charges are filed unevenly. "Right now, we have police officers come to certain attorneys to have them file because they don't want" other attorneys, he said.

"Justice shouldn't depend on the personality of the DA," Lee said.