

The Salt Lake Tribune

How to handle the homeless? Salt Lake City Council hopefuls weigh in

By Aaron Falk

The Salt Lake Tribune

Published: August 22, 2011 10:26AM

Updated: August 22, 2011 08:04AM

Krista Bowers has lived out of her car and in a shelter. Even now, she says, she feels like she's "teetering on the edge" of homelessness.

In the face of such uncertainty, the Salt Lake City woman was one of about 100 people who filled an east-side church Sunday morning for a chance to ask a handful of City Council hopefuls how they intend to help some of the city's most vulnerable residents.

"There are a lot of good people in this city, but as a private citizen, it can be hard to know what you can do," said Bill Tibbetts, executive director of the Crossroads Urban Center, who hosted the forum at First Unitarian Church.

Councilman J.T. Martin, who represents the city's east bench, said there are opportunities within the city to help the homeless with jobs.

"These folks are good people who know how to work, but don't have a work experience," he said.

Martin's two challengers in District 6, however, said the city could do more to help than it has the past four years.

Challenger Charlie Luke, a lobbyist who serves on the city's Planning Commission, questioned the council's efforts to ban panhandling within the city.

"If the political will was there to address that issue, it should have been there to come up with a solution other than just criminalizing panhandling," Luke said.

Tracey Harty, an account manager at a Salt Lake marketing firm and a challenger in District 6, said she would support tax incentives for businesses to hire the homeless. Harty also called the Salvation Army of Utah's decision to stop serving meals at a downtown shelter because of budget constraints, in favor of delivering the meals to places homeless Utahns congregate, an "emergency" that needs to be dealt with immediately.

But Councilman Luke Garrott, who faces challenger Jack Gray in District 4, said city officials are “really constrained” by state and federal governments when it comes to issues of poverty.

Garrott said bureaucratic red tape would make it difficult for the city to offer low-skilled day work for the homeless. Instead, Garrott said, the city must partner with nonprofits and community groups to address most issues.

“Is there the political will for a city like Salt Lake to take care of its own poor? Dealing with issues of poverty is not on the radar in terms of community government,” Garrott said. “We have a lot of community building to do first.”

Gray said he would be a “new voice” on the council, with “all kinds of new ideas.”

Bowers, who volunteers at the Salt Lake City Bicycle Collective, lamented the erosion of bus services within the city and asked candidate hopefuls to address transit needs for the homeless.

Garrott said he would support raising the sales tax to help pay for local bus services. “But we need approval from the state Legislature,” he said, “and they couldn’t be more anti-tax increase.”

Martin, meanwhile, called on those in attendance to volunteer time and money to fighting poverty issues.

afalk@sltrib.com

Twitter: @aaronfalk

© 2011 The Salt Lake Tribune