

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



ELECTION 2022: Stoker, Hart debate issues

Assembly candidates discuss crime, climate change and more at forum

by Dave Mason
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Candidates Mike Stoker and Gregg Hart addressed everything from infrastructure to abortion rights, climate change and crime at a forum this week.

Mr. Stoker and Mr. Hart, who are running against each other in the newly formed 37th Assembly District in the Nov. 8 election, answered questions from moderator Claire Van Blaricum and the audience during the forum Thursday evening at the Santa Barbara Woman's Club.

The event was presented by the League of Women's Voters chapters in Santa Barbara and Santa Maria Valley, Future Leaders of America and the Santa Barbara-Goleta Valley branch of the American Association of University Women.

Mr. Hart, the Democratic candidate and current 2nd District representative on the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors, stressed the importance of

dealing with climate change, funding law enforcement and creating a diverse portfolio of water sources.

Mr. Stoker, the Republican nominee and a former regional Environmental Protection Agency administrator, stressed his goals of helping small business



"It doesn't work to lock everyone up, but it's critically important to lock up people who pose a public safety threat," candidate Gregg Hart said as he discussed law enforcement at the forum.

owners, keeping criminals in jail and building reservoirs to complement a diverse portfolio of water sources.

“California is heading in the wrong direction,” Mr. Stoker, a former Santa Barbara County supervisor, said. “We need a change. Look at what’s going on; it’s crazy.

“Small businesses do not have a representative for them. Parents are under attack for being parents,” Mr. Stoker said. “Criminals are allowed to go free; we make excuses for them.”

Mr. Stoker stressed he wanted to be an advocate for small businesses and taxpayers, as well as for “smart energy policies to lower the price of gas at the pump.

“I’m going to fight for smart water policies — desalination on the coast and more reservoirs throughout the state,” he said.

Mr. Stoker noted reservoirs haven’t been built in California since the 1960s.

Mr. Hart emphasized the need to make the transition to clean-burning fuels as the state deals with climate change and one of its byproducts, wildfires.

“Electric vehicles are a critical component,” he said.

Conceding the change to electric vehicles won’t be easy, Mr. Hart said, “I see this as a half-full cup.”

“I drive an electric vehicle myself,” he said. “I can tell you it’s great.”

Mr. Stoker said he’s all for electric vehicles and renewable resources. “But it’s not going to happen overnight.”

“We need to do it right. We need to do it smart,” he said.

Concerning wildfires, Mr. Hart noted the county’s purchase of military grade helicopters that were successfully deployed in fighting wildfires. He also cited innovations such as the use of goats to graze areas, reducing the fuel for fires.

“I agree pretty much,” Mr. Stoker said after Mr. Hart spoke. But he added that it was important to have more clearance with dead wood.

Both candidates said they support a woman's right to an abortion.

Mr. Hart said he supported state Proposition 1, a Constitutional Right to Reproductive Freedom. It's on the Nov. 8 ballot.

"The decision by the U.S. Supreme Court to strip away a woman's right to have legal access to abortion is a travesty. It's the first time the Supreme Court has rolled back a fundamental right for women in our lifetimes," he said.

Mr. Stoker said he has always supported a woman's right to an abortion, but noted, "it's already a constitutional right in the state of California, voted on in 1974 and reaffirmed in 1981 by the state Supreme Court."

"I'm not going to overturn any laws. I'm not going to overturn Roe v. Wade," Mr. Stoker said. "I'm not going to overturn the women's constitutional amendment."

But he added parents should have the right to give consent if their under-age daughter seeks an abortion.

On infrastructure, Mr. Hart pointed to the quantity of street improvements on the city and county levels, as well as the Highway 101 work that is five years from completion.

But Mr. Stoker criticized the state Legislature for its pattern of diverting money slated for infrastructure to other priorities. He said the state government persuades voters to approve bonds to build reservoirs, then diverts the money to environmental projects unrelated to reservoirs.

"The people running this state have not made infrastructure a priority," he said.

On the issue of affordable housing, Mr. Stoker proposed fast tracking for housing projects, reducing costs for developers.

He added that mobile home parks have proven to be affordable.

"I think there's tremendous creativity and resourcefulness on the local level," Mr. Hart said, regarding affordable housing efforts. But he noted local governments need more funding to address the issue.

On public safety, Mr. Stoker stressed the need to keep criminals in jail.

“It’s catch and release,” Mr. Stoker said. “We’re not going to stop the problem with crime unless we make those who commit a crime pay for the crime, not by letting them out early.”

Mr. Hart, a former Santa Barbara City Council member, said that during his long career as an elected official, he has worked to increase funding for law enforcement. He also stressed the need to support mental health and drug and alcohol treatments for those who need it.

“It doesn’t work to lock everyone up, but it’s critically important to lock up people who pose a public safety threat,” Mr. Hart said.

Mr. Stoker also cited the urgency of mental health treatments. “I will support a bond to get mental health clinics built throughout the state.”

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