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Freeway is hot topic at forum

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SOUTH PASADENA - A new study linking growing up near a freeway to permanent lung and heart problems has become the latest rallying cry for Long Beach (710) Freeway fighters seeking seats on the South Pasadena City Council.

During the city's first candidate forum of the new campaign Tuesday night, five of six candidates pointed to the findings as absolute proof the city needs to continue fighting extension of the 710 - including the tunnel alternative - no matter what the cost.

Released by USC last week, the study says that living within 500 feet of a freeway is as dangerous to children's lungs as living in cities with the highest pollution levels. Children near freeways are significantly more likely to suffer respiratory problems for the rest of their lives than other children, researchers contend.

"Five hundred feet in either direction, that would be half the town in South Pasadena," said Ernie Arnold, one of the most vocal freeway opponents.

The debate was sponsored by Citizens to Save South Pasadena, an anti-710 freeway coalition, and the South Pasadena Preservation Society.

Early in the evening, Councilman Mike Ten was identified as odd man out among the other candidates: Arnold, Robert Conte, Councilman David Margrave, Richard Schneider and David Sifuentes. Ten, a Republican who launched an unsuccessful bid to unseat Democratic state Sen. Gil Cedillo in the November election, is the only candidate to support a tunnel option for the freeway.

While not questioning the validity of the USC study, Ten said the thousands of cars driving through South Pasadena were emitting high levels of pollution near the city's schools and neighborhoods "right now."

He also pointed to seven incidents in which school children were hit by cars during the last two years. Six of the drivers involved in those accidents - including a driver who hit two middle school girls in 2006 - were passing through the city, he said.

"That's one driver I wish was in a tunnel," said Ten.

Not much new ground was covered during the two-hour forum. Sifuentes, a captain with the Los Angeles Fire Department, said raising the salaries of the city's police and firefighters would be his biggest priority in office. He also made vague reference to the multiple conflict-of-interest charges levied against Margrave during the past four years.

The city needs a "shift in priorities," and leaders who "hold themselves accountable for the decisions they make and the decisions they don't," Sifuentes said.

The event took an unexpected turn during closing statements when Margrave appeared to become quite emotional as he described his life and the friends he's made in South Pasadena.

"My dad used to say you leave this world the same way you enter it, with nothing," he said. "But I've come to realize that because of numerous friends and memories, he's wrong."

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