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At L.A. mayoral forum, top candidates say housing is a priority

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At a time when many Angelenos are grappling with foreclosures and rising rental costs have far outpaced growth in their incomes, the three top Los Angeles mayoral candidates promised Friday to make housing policy a central focus for their administrations.

City Councilman Eric Garcetti renewed his ambitious pledge to end homelessness in Los Angeles, rather than “manage it.” Councilwoman Jan Perry said she would try to replicate her achievements getting affordable housing units built in the disparate communities of downtown and South L.A. throughout the city.

And City Controller Wendy Greuel argued that her experience as a former federal housing administrator, as well as an aide to former Mayor Tom Bradley on housing and

homelessness issues, would help her to expand L.A.'s share of housing funding to reach a broader spectrum of city residents.

Little was left to chance at Friday night's forum, which was limited to candidates who had gathered \$1 million in campaign contributions by a September deadline. The event was organized by the Housing for a Stronger Los Angeles coalition and held at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. The candidates were briefed on the questions in advance. There were few, if any, disagreements as they answered questions from Raphael Bostic, a housing economist at the University of Southern California. All of the candidates, for example, said they were committed to restoring the city's Housing Trust Fund to \$100 million and that they would have a deputy mayor devoted to housing issues.

Though there was little policy daylight between them, all three candidates said city officials needed to lobby more forcefully for outside resources — each arguing that aspects of their biography made them best-equipped to do so.

The loss of state and federal funds has stalled or jeopardized thousands of projects for lower-income families across the state. Los Angeles and many other California cities were rocked by the withdrawal of \$1 billion a year in funding from the state's municipal redevelopment agencies, which were eliminated at the urging of Gov. Jerry Brown to help bring the state back into the black. Under state law, the redevelopment agencies were required to devote a fifth of the revenue that they generated to affordable housing. But a series of scandals made it easier for Brown to argue to get rid of them.

Federal funding has also been dramatically reduced. California received just \$131 million from the HOME Investment Partnerships Program in the fiscal year that ended mid-2012 — less than half the amount that was available in the previous fiscal year. There has also been far less money available from the Community Development Block Grant program, which has often been dedicated to affordable housing.

Garcetti said that as mayor he would try to force Sacramento to pay more attention to the unique gap between incomes and housing prices in Los Angeles — making the case for an L.A.-specific tax credit.

The former city council president said he would seek to build more housing projects that bring lower- and middle-income Angelenos together, citing the example of the W Hotel project in Hollywood, where he negotiated for more than 20% of the units to be reserved for lower-income residents. He won over opponents, he said, by explaining the environmental and community benefits of creating housing that would appeal to both lower-income and middle-class workers.

“A housekeeper who works at the W Hotel now has a shot at going home to her own daughter after work on the same block where she works — to help her with homework and make sure that she's more successful in school,” Garcetti said. “There's a more stabilized community, and that she's not getting into a car and going to the Inland Empire because that's the only place where she can afford to live. These things are tied together.”

Perry, who presided over a development renaissance in her downtown Los Angeles district over the last decade while also overseeing a series of housing projects aimed at revitalizing historic South L.A. corridors like Central Avenue, said she looked forward to

wielding three powerful tools at the mayor's disposal: land use and zoning regulations, and three seats on the county's Metropolitan Transportation Authority board.

"Every community has its needs, every community has its populations to be served," Perry said. "Wherever we can find a bit of land on which to build, as mayor I would make sure that we grab it, and find a developer and build on it, and put people back into housing, and make sure that we do it intelligently."

Greuel repeatedly circled back to the central theme of her campaign: ensuring accountability for the dollars spent on housing in Los Angeles. She noted that the controller's office is in the middle of auditing the city's use of funds from the Neighborhood Stabilization Program, federal dollars that are used to rehabilitate foreclosed properties and make them available to lower-income buyers and renters.

The controller also pledged to keep the pressure on banks to make it easier for Angelenos facing foreclosure to stay in their homes. Even though the number of foreclosures is dropping, Greuel said, "it doesn't mean the crisis is over."

"Everyone's dream is to own a home one day. We need to make sure it doesn't become a nightmare, and that we help them in doing that," she said.

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-- Maeve Reston

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Photo: Los Angeles mayoral candidates Jan Perry, left, Kevin James, Eric Garcetti and Wendy Greuel at a forum in September. Credit: Allen J. Schaben / Los Angeles Times

<http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2013/01/at-la-mayoral-forum-top-candidates-say-housing-is-a-priority.html>