

Five candidates vie for 2 seats on 'divided' Maricopa Community Colleges board

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The board is officially non-partisan, but current members have clashed frequently over issues that affect 120,000 students



(Photo: Mary Beth Faller/The Republic)

Five candidates are competing for two seats Tuesday on the Maricopa Community Colleges governing board, whose current members have clashed frequently over the challenges faced by one of the nation's largest community college systems.

Funding has been a focal point of the candidates who have spoken at recent forums. The 10-college district does not receive any state funding and in recent years has consistently had to raise property taxes and tuition to offset those losses.

Linda Thor, a former president of Rio Salado College, is challenging incumbent John Heep for one of the two at-large seats on the board that is voted countywide.

Three candidates are looking to succeed Doyle Burke in District 1, which covers the East Valley: Moses Sanchez, a member of the Tempe Union High School District board; Mesa vice mayor Dennis Kavanaugh; and Laurin Hendrix, a former state lawmaker.

Two incumbents, board president Alfredo Gutierrez and Dana Saar, are running unopposed for reelection. The three remaining seats are not on the ballot this year.

Enrollment, funding challenges loom

The community college district, with more than 120,000 students, has struggled with declining enrollment and budget pressures that have led to tuition rises three times since 2012 to \$86 per credit hour.

Low enrollment numbers this year opened discussions about closing Mesa Community College's Red Mountain campus, which the system ultimately decided against.

But all this comes at a time when the district's current board has been at odds with each other — most recently when it appointed a new chancellor in May.

The board hired Maria Harper-Marinick, a longtime Maricopa Community Colleges administrator, to succeed Rufus Glasper, but some board members were critical of the hiring process. It led to harsh and public outcry at a subsequent meeting.

"We're at an existential moment in the life in the colleges," Gutierrez said.

The governing board and its elections are officially nonpartisan, but Gutierrez said the current board is "deeply divided."

What's on the ballot? Who's running?

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"It's divided along ideological grounds, different visions of what the future should be about. And it's divided at a time we're facing extraordinary challenges," Gutierrez said.

The candidates, though, appeared united on one front: funding remains a critical issue for the district.

Sanchez, a professor at South Mountain Community College, said at a recent forum he would not support any tuition increases if elected. As board president of the Tempe Union High School District board, Sanchez said he is familiar with "optimizing resources" in the midst of state funding cuts.

"I'm not going to tell my students that I'm going to support raising their tuition when there's other methods, in my opinion," Sanchez said.

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'Be as transparent as possible'

Neither Kavanaugh nor Thor shut the door completely not raising tuition and property taxes.

"I think it's foolish to say as an elected official 'I will never raise taxes or I'll never raise tuition' because that may be a tool that you may need to use," Kavanaugh said. "But if you're going to use it, you have to be as transparent as possible."

Kavanaugh touted his experience as vice mayor of Mesa and as a consensus builder. A registered independent, Kavanaugh said, "I've always put party politics out in the parking lot when working on issues for the city and the same should really hold true here at the governing board."



Thor said her experience on the other end of the relationship between the district's governing board and its top executives make her an ideal candidate. She said she understands the symbiotic relationship between the two and would use the connections she made as president of Rio Salado College to foster community partnerships.

On the issue of potential tuition and tax increases, Thor said, raising either one "would weight heavily on me" and that she would "first want to hold the Legislature responsible for disinvesting in (Maricopa Community Colleges).

Heep first ran for the community college board in 2014 as part of a conservative bloc that included current board members Johanna Haver and Jean McGrath. They were each successfully elected on a pledge to cut spending, stop tax increases and reduce tuition.

Hendrix did not participate in any of the candidate forums because he felt it was a conflict of interest that they had been organized by the college district, according to a moderator at one of the forums.

Hendrix could not be immediately reached for comment.

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Maricopa Community College board candidates

District 1:

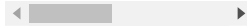
- Dennis Kavanaugh, vice mayor for the city of Mesa and attorney specializing in workers' compensation claims.
- Moses Sanchez, professor at South Mountain Community College and Tempe Union High School District governing board member.
- Laurin Hendrix, Realtor and former state lawmaker

At-large:

- John Heep, retired businessman and incumbent.
- Linda Thor, former president of Rio Salado College for 20 years.

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