

## LOCAL

# Stockton nonprofit donors react to candidate speeches at councilmember Padilla event

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Two Stockton nonprofits barred from participating in political activity donated supplies to a city council member's cookout Saturday where political candidates talked about elections onstage, the nonprofits' leaders said Thursday.

On July 20, District 1 Councilmember Michele Padilla held a public cookout at Michael Faklis Park in north Stockton.

At the event, four candidates — city council hopeful Mario Enriquez, mayoral candidate and former council member Christina Fugazi, San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors candidate Mario Gardea, and council candidate Jason Lee — spoke onstage.

The food resources nonprofit Bread of Life donated drinks to the cookout, and Stockton 209 Cares — a nonprofit supporting needy families and homeless residents — donated backpacks for the event's backpack giveaway, the organizations' founders said.

Bread of Life rescinded its donation to steer clear of laws against nonprofits supporting political campaigns, founder Gina Valadez-Bracamonte, who is also running for city council, stated Thursday.

“Based on the event’s advertisement, our staff believed the event was a celebration of community, nothing more,” Valadez-Bracamonte stated. “Our board recently learned that the event was, indeed, political.”

In contrast, 209 Cares founder Nancy Lamb felt that donating to the event did not cross the line for an apolitical nonprofit, she said.

“We weren’t involved in a political event,” Lamb said. “Being involved in a political event, you have to know that it was political, and it wasn’t ... we don’t endorse anyone,” she said.

## **What did candidates say onstage?**

At some point during the cookout, Padilla called Enriquez, Fugazi, Gardea and Lee to the stage, the councilwoman said in an interview Thursday.

As each candidate took the mic, some of their comments conveyed specific messages about the November election, clips shared with The Record show.

“I know each and every one of us are tired of the status quo, and electing the same old, same old people who have no idea what they’re doing,” Enriquez said. “So I’m proud to say I’m running for city council.”

“To get behind anybody else other than Christina Fugazi will take the city of Stockton back a hundred years,” Lee said.

“The person she’s running against is bad for the city, he’s bad for women and he’s bad for the progress of all you who are raising children in this community.”

Enriquez is running in District 4 against Valadez-Bracamonte, and Fugazi is running for the mayor's seat against county supervisor Tom Patti.

## **What does the law say?**

Under federal law, nonprofits such as Bread of Life and 209 Cares are barred from participating in campaigns.

“All 501(c)(3) (nonprofit) organizations are prohibited from participating in any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate running for public office,” the IRS states. Politicking can lose nonprofits their tax-exempt status, the agency states.

“Donating to a political event is in direct violation” of the law, Valadez-Bracamonte stated.

“(Councilmember) Padilla agreed to pay market value for all the donated products personally.”

“I see it differently,” Lamb said. “It was put on for the community.”

A nonprofit attorney did not return a call seeking comment about the organizations' participation.

## **Political gathering or community event?**

This week, some of Padilla's city council colleagues criticized the event as an alleged violation of rules about how city money can be spent.

"It is essential to safeguard the integrity of community events from partisan influences," District 5 councilmember Brando Villapudua stated Thursday.

Padilla requested several thousand dollars of council discretionary funds to pay for the event, city expense records show.

When the city budget allows, each council member receives \$15,000 — the mayor receives \$60,000 — for activities that benefit the community, according to city council policy.

Council members may not use that money for events that are "religious or political in nature," the rules state.

Discretionary fund requests are reviewed by the Stockton City Attorney's office, and disbursed by the city manager's office, according to city spokesperson Connie Cochran.

"If in the (event) description it had anything that said, (this is) a forum for people who are running for office, they would not have signed off on it," Cochran said.

When reached by phone Thursday, Padilla was emphatic that she did not believe the cookout had been a political gathering.

"At no time did I ever feel ... or consider that this was politically driven; that their comments were politically driven," the councilwoman said.

While Padilla did not specifically invite every candidate running for a local seat this November to the event, she invited anyone she ran into, and it was open to everyone, she said.

Padilla did not know the candidates were going to talk about the election when invited onstage, she said.

"What led to that is, I was specifically speaking with regard to how partnerships are important throughout the city," the councilmember said. "I said I want to invite my friends

up, and I introduced them as my friends.”

Padilla also addressed her fellow council members' reactions to the use of city money on the event.

“I understand what they're feeling and what they're thinking,” she said. “Most definitely going forward ... I would be more cognizant.”

In a later written statement to The Record, Padilla said, “...this is an attempt by political opponents, unhappy with their own lack of support in the community, to distract from the great event that residents of District 1 enjoyed.”

“The only people interpreting this positive community event as a negative are political operatives, who seek to damage my reputation through misinformation.”

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