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## Jail, budget, corruption key topics for candidates

By [MADELINE BUCKLEY/The Brownsville Herald](#)

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Candidates for Cameron County district attorney and county sheriff gathered Friday evening to answer voters' questions on local issues, chief among them being corruption of public officials, the county budget and jail overcrowding.

A lively audience of about 50 people convened at the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 2035 in Brownsville and submitted questions ranging from candidates' experience and budget issues to border violence.

Sheriff candidates Joe Cisneros and Terry Vinson, both running as Democrats, attended the event hosted by Bringing Brownsville Change. Current Sheriff Omar Lucio, also running as a Democrat, was not present.

For district attorney, Republican candidates Chuck Mattingly and Gus Garza and Democrats Carlos Masso and Luis Saenz fielded questions. Maria DeFord, a Democrat, has also filed as a candidate but did not attend.

Candidates continually mentioned problems of overcrowding in the Cameron County Jail, citing the issue as a strain on the county budget.

Both Vinson and Cisneros criticized the current system of sending inmates to detention centers in Zapata and Brooks counties to ease overcrowding, citing large taxpayer costs.

The county spends about \$200,000 a month to house those inmates elsewhere.

"The sheriff should take control of the jail and operate it in an efficient way," Cisneros, a former Department of Public Safety trooper, said.

Vinson, a former sergeant in the Sheriff's Department, also said, if elected, he would focus on keeping inmates in the Cameron County Jail and work to expedite cases to move inmates out as quickly as possible when the courts release them.

"We have to cut spending in the county," Vinson said.

The men also addressed a question on whether they would support collective bargaining for employees in the department. Cisneros said he is supportive, while Vinson did not take a stance, saying it "depends entirely on how it is handled."

The candidates for district attorney all touted strong anti-corruption messages and some said the case intake process in the office could be made more efficient.

Masso, a former prosecutor in the district attorney's office, said if elected he would establish an intake unit to look at jail cases and efficiently move them through the system to ease overcrowding. He also said he would create the position of chief misdemeanor prosecutor.

"Jail cases have priority," he said, citing the \$200,000 figure the county is spending to house inmates in other counties.

Mattingly said he also has considered creating the position of chief misdemeanor prosecutor as well as a chief felony prosecutor.

"I will make sure we have absolutely qualified personnel," Mattingly said.

Saenz, a former Cameron County district attorney, emphasized his experience, claiming to have prosecuted more murders in the county than any other attorney. He said he would be accessible to the people.

"Walk into any courtroom and ask where I'm going to be," Saenz said.

Garza, a former Willacy County district attorney, said he also would implement an intake division with the most experienced prosecutors reviewing cases.

"My first case is to develop a good, efficient intake system that will eliminate jail overcrowding and save county dollars," he said.

The forum was moderated by Melissa Zamora, a Brownsville city commissioner; Francisco Rendon, chairman of the Texas Southmost College Board of Trustees; and Erasmo Castro, director of Bringing Brownsville Change.