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Ninth District: Cubas, Hara See Biotech In South L.A.'s Future

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Imagine South Central LA as the biotechnology capital of California — prosperous, clean, peaceful — and with plenty of jobs. Terry Hara and Ana Cubas, both candidates for the 9th District City Council, believe that with lots of work on the streets such a future is not too far off.

At a recent South Central City Council forum at Maya Angelou High School, Hara and Cubas revealed their faith in biotech jobs as the wave of the future and as a means to alleviate poverty in South Central. But are biotechs feasible for South Central?

To attract biotechs, Hara and Cubas said they would drastically improve South Central's job-skill levels. Currently, more than 70 percent of South Central's residents work in the service industry, according to a recent government survey of the 9th District.

Biotechnology companies use living things, like cells and tissues, to create useful medical, agricultural, and energy-related products. Amgen, Biogen and Gilead Inc. are just a few.

Job positions in these industries include laboratory technicians, plant breeders and researchers. Such jobs not only "fared better" in the economic downturn but also grew faster, according to the Economic Policy Institute. And the average biotech salary is \$62,000 whereas the average South Central salary is \$30,882 — which is low for the city of Los Angeles, according to a recent L.A. Times poll.

"My plan is bold and audacious," Cubas said. "We don't want service jobs anymore, but jobs of the 21st century. I want to tap into those resources."

Cubas cited her experience as chief of staff in the 14th District as one proof of her qualifications. She helped create the L.A. Clean Tech Incubator, an organization that supports biotech startups with office space, mentoring and other resources. It is one part of Mayor Villaraigosa's plan to shift California from fossil to bio fuels by 2020.

In addition, Cubas spoke of her plans to transform the empty warehouses along Hill Street, Alameda Boulevard and South San Pedro Street as key to the transformation.

"Imagine that in nine to 10 years South Central is number one in biotech and clean jobs. Wouldn't that be amazing?" said Cubas as she sat at her desk — a pastel of JFK deep in thought behind her. "I just think we need to do a 360 on our views of what is South-Central."

To entice biotech companies into the streets of South Central, Hara was intent on practical, simple solutions — like cleaning up the streets.

"Right now, we rely on the city to clean up," said Hara, a deputy chief with the Los Angeles Police Department. "But what about people taking that ownership?"

Hara advocates a "trash-to-treasure" program where the community, including non-violent ex-gang members, would be given the opportunity to cash in trash illegally dumped in South Central.

"Why not partner with the community to provide skills to ex-gang members?" Hara said. "If they could choose between gangs and work, they will choose work."



USC's Health Sciences Campus would be ideal for a nearby biotech plant, if not for Central Juvenile Hall at its gates. (Creative Commons/Aaron Logan)

Before a community could accomplish anything of significance though, Hara said, it must take pride in its neighborhood – a notion the LAPD has pursued through a broken windows approach to crime. This principle holds that cracking down on small offenses like illegal dumping will deter larger crimes. Hara said neighborhoods must dispose of trash, observe sanitary regulations and keep streets and sidewalks cleared.

“When you take pride, people driving through your neighborhood will too,” said Hara who works from a meticulously clean, orderly political headquarters, where stacks of leaflets are piled neatly on rows of tables and volunteers work quickly and efficiently entering long lists of supporters' names into Excel spreadsheets.

As president of the Japan American Society of Southern California, which fosters business relationship between Japan and the U.S., Hara said he would try to attract Japanese auto manufacturers that use green technology, according to campaign manager Samuel Liu.

“Japanese car manufacturers are championing green technology,” Liu said. “They are at the frontier, always looking for opportunities.”

As a former commanding officer of the LAPD's Personnel and Training Bureau, Hara said he is not daunted by the challenge of securing and cleaning up the streets.

“I know how important collaboration is to getting things done,” Hara said. “I will cut the red tape and take the bull by the horns.”

But overall, South Central has a long way to go to become a biotech hub, according to Ahmed Enany, a business adviser and founder of the Southern California Biomedical Council. It lacks the security and the job skills to build up the infrastructure for biotech companies.

Biotech companies, Enany said, tend to locate around safe, educated areas with research parks and universities as well as with service providers such as venture capital and accounting firms. West Angeles—and the area around UCLA—is perfect.

South Central has some advantages like USC research facilities and plenty of cheap space that could be redeveloped very easily.

If not for the Central Juvenile Hall at its gates, the 79-acre USC Health Sciences Campus, which houses the Keck School of Medicine, would be ideal for building a biotech nearby, Enany said. But the Hall reminds investors of the violence that rocks South-Central.

“If you brought in venture capitalists, they would run away,” Enany said. “The USC medical school is there. But there are immediate neighborhood problems like gangs to be taken care of first.”

This would be a deterrent to attracting educated individuals to live and work in such a region. And without talent, it couldn't survive, Enany said.

“Biotechs are heavily regulated industries,” Enany said. “Companies don't just hire people because they are available and cheap. You need skill-training programs to give people the required skills to work in biotech” — skills in quality assurance and control, technical equipment and hazardous chemicals, for instance.

It takes about 10 to 20 years for a city to feel the favorable effects of biotech companies, Enany said. As biotechs establish themselves, they draw more green businesses — industrial, chemical and biomedical — to the area and a network of venture capital firms and startups. The financial well being of the area then rises.

San Francisco's Mission Bay Medical Center is a prime example of what biotechs can accomplish. Since the medical center opened in 2003, it has attracted 50 bioscience startups and nine pharmaceutical and biotech companies, according to its website.

In South Central, businesses exist in a volatile environment, which impedes growth, he said.

Reach Aaron Hagstrom [here](#).