

VA APAs Flex Muscle with 2005 Candidates' Forum

By Jackie Bong-Wright

A Historic Event

With the heat of summer rising, a growing alliance of Asian Pacific American (APA) groups is trying to put the finishing details on the first-ever all-APA sponsored Candidates' Forum in Northern Virginia. Twelve initial participant groups include the Asian Pacific American Bar Association – DC Chapter (APABA), Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA), Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans of Virginia (CAPAVA), Federal Asian Pacific American Coalition (FAPAC), Indian Political Educational Forum (IPEF), Korean American Coalition - DC (KAC-DC), Korean American Association of Northern Virginia (KAA-NOVA), Korean American Association of Washington Metropolitan Area (KAA-Washington), National Congress of Vietnamese Americans (NCVA), National Association of Korean Americans - Washington (NAKA-Washington), Organization of Chinese Americans - Northern Virginia Chapter (OCA-NOVA), and the Vietnamese American Voters Association (VAVA).

This year, 13 incumbent Delegates and 5 new candidates from the Democratic party as well as 7 incumbent and 8 new Republican candidates are competing for the House of Delegates, in addition to the offices of Governor, Lieutenant Governor and Attorney General positions.

“The importance of having an all-APA Candidates' Forum is to have the political candidates be aware of the growing size of Virginia's APA community,” said Eric Jensen, Chairman of the Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans of Virginia, one of the groups involved.

“This is the first time the entire non-partisan alliance of APA groups are joining together to hear from candidates running for these important state offices,” said Satish Korpe, President of the Indian Political Education Forum.

APAs' Strength in Virginia

The APA community in Virginia is gaining momentum in numbers and in economic power. The 2000 Census showed that Virginia was one of the ten states which had the fastest growing and the largest Asian population. There are between 315,000 and 360,000 (4.2%) APA residents in the state, 47% of whom hold a Bachelor degree or higher. Around 22,500 APA-owned firms generate \$4.4 billion in gross revenues and provide 47,000 jobs to the economy of Virginia. The 2004 Census affirmed that the median APA income was approximately \$55,700 versus \$43,300 for all households, and 70% were homeowners.

Yet 14% of APA families still live in poverty and do not get fair access to state services, language assistance or inclusion in policy decisions. APA suffer higher rates of hepatitis B, diabetes, cancer and tuberculosis than the general population. APA gang violence is increasing in the Commonwealth in the extortion of APA businesses.

Yet, there are no APA elected state officials, accounting for a huge disparity of political under-

representation. For this reason, APA groups, led by CAPAVA, feel they have the responsibility to ask elected officials to budget a state APA outreach office to help APA communities gain access to state services. At the same time, APAs help the state reach APA communities and also extend and increase trade with APAs' home countries.

Intense Planning Effort

Because of the chaotic nature of political campaigns, organizers have found it difficult to pin down a Saturday afternoon in the coming months when most candidates will be available. The alliance has set September 10 for the event, and a venue holding 300 to 500 is being sought.

There has been a steady stream of communications to Democrat, Republican and Independent candidates and among organizing committee members. A Steering Committee has been set up and alliance members have been meeting on a bi-weekly basis since early February. "We can use all the help from community groups we can get," said Ting-Yi Oei, President of CAPAVA, "particularly as we try to get as many APA constituents as possible to turn out and demonstrate our community's interest."

APA Unity is Stressed

A more subtle but arguably more important by-product of the planning effort for the Forum is the first-time cooperation among APA groups of different political orientations in Virginia. In early November 2004, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), with the help of several co-sponsoring organizations, conducted the nation's largest exit poll of almost 11,000 Asian American voters, a third of whom were first-time voters. The questionnaire was written in 8 languages and Asian Americans were surveyed in 23 cities in 8 states including Virginia.

The survey showed that 47% of Asian Americans were registered Democrats in Northern Virginia, and 53% of Southeast Asians registered Republicans. 35% were first-time voters, over a third of whom were limited English-proficient and needed some form of language assistance to vote. They depended on their ethnic press to learn about politics and community issues to make their voting decisions. Civil liberties and security, followed by affirmative action and racial profiling, were among the top issues on which these voters cast their ballots.

"By sponsoring an APA alliance event, the groups hope to educate APA constituents about the state political and elections process," said Julie Park of the Korean American Coalition-DC.

"By hosting this important APA event, we hope also to inform the candidates about our community's issues in Virginia," said Hung Nguyen, President of the National Congress of Vietnamese Americans.

Rose Chu, a member of the Organization of Chinese Americans, said, "In this year's state elections, our alliance groups think it is important to increase the number of APA votes, especially by students and younger voters."

Jackie Bong-Wright of the Vietnamese American Voters' Association is calling on all APAs to speed up their voter registration drives and motivate APAs to go to the polls.

“This is another benchmark -- APA communities are working together to bring APA issues to state elected officials, while helping our communities understand the political process and the importance of participating in it,” said Ben Bahn, a Forum Steering Committee official.

For that reason, the Forum's organizers are making an effort to reach up to 20 APA groups to co-sponsor this historic occasion and ask APA businesses to underwrite some of the costs.

Wide Support Expected

Invitations are being sent to political candidates and their respective political parties.

“Candidates who have learned of the event have enthusiastically asked to participate,” said Manshik Kim, President of the National Association of Korean Americans. “Candidates and political parties are responding positively.”

Media attention is also being sought. A press conference to reach APA and mainstream media will be held in the afternoon of August 23 at China Garden restaurant in Rosslyn. A press release focusing on key issues and talking points will be sent out, and flyers of the event will be disseminated to APA stores, malls, restaurants, and churches. An APA media celebrity will be invited to be the Moderator of the Candidates' Forum.

Alex Chan, a Steering Committee member and former President of the Federal Asian Pacific American Coalition, and Jun Koo of the Korean American Coalition of Washington, DC, will spearhead efforts to contact Asian-language newspapers and other media about the Forum.

Jackie Bong-Wright, President of the Vietnamese American Voters Association, and Julie Park of the Korean American Coalition will work on advertising and publicity.

For more information about the APA Candidates' Forum, contact Ting-Yi Obi, ting.oei@verizon.net; Julie Park, Julie.park@gmsp.org; or Eric Jensen, eljensen@comcast.net.