

Charles Kuffner

Speaking today with Jesus Nieto, who is running for the Harris Central Appraisal District Board of Directors, position three, one of the nonpartisan elected roles that were created for 2024 and are now on the ballot again. Jesus, thank you for speaking with me today. Let me start by asking why you're running for this office.

Jesus Nieto

Yeah, good afternoon, everybody. Yeah, thank you so much for having me here. My name is Jesus Nieto and I'm running for this position because this is an opportunity to flip a seat in Harris County from being a Republican controlled seat to a Democrat controlled seat. This race is nonpartisan, so there won't be a D or R next to our names. However, you know, it's very important to make sure that we're electing the Democrats all across Harris County and up and down the ballot.

Charles Kuffner

All right. I would like to know a little bit more about your background and and political experience. I'm going to ask you specifically about your race for Katy ISD, but give me some general background on who you are, what you do.

Jesus Nieto

Yeah, so I graduated from the University of Houston downtown with a major in political science and minors in communications and public policy and administration. I have been an organizer in both Harris and Fort Bend County for the past five or six years, you know, going into communities, talking to everyday people, going door to door and just seeing what are their top issues, you know, within the community that they live in. I worked in the nonprofit space and also worked on multiple campaigns, whether they were local, state or federal level races. And, of course, recently I ran for KDISD school board this past May, trying to, you know, fight for our educators and public education here in Harris County and the state of Texas.

Charles Kuffner

Tell me, tell me a bit more about that. What did, you know, the Katy ISD was taken over a couple of years ago by some right wing board members. They made some changes that were not very popular on matters relating to LGBTQ students, for example. But more recently, those people were defeated in elections. So tell me about your experience there and what you learned from it.

Jesus Nieto

Yeah, I mean, you know, I started to get involved with a community group out here in Katy ISD that, you know, it's a nonpartisan group. So you had Democrats, independents, Republicans alike, all just trying to come together to fight against what these extremists were doing that were on the school board, that were backed by Moms for Liberty, that were backed by the Harris GOP, backed by all these extremist groups. And that's where I got my start before running for that seat.

You know, I was very involved. I was going to different community meetings and also at the school board meetings, speaking up, you know, trying to bring a voice to the marginalized community that was being attacked consistently. Not just by their comments on the board, but also by the legislation and policies that they were passing that impacted students, educators and staff across the district.

So, you know, I got very involved there and I was just consistently speaking up for students and teachers, which is what ignited my passion to eventually, you know, get off the couch and not just sit there and allow them to win again. You know, I tried to do something about it and I filed for office and, you know, tried to get in there to put up a good fight.

Charles Kuffner

All right. So now you're running for the Harris Central Appraisal District Board of Directors. This had been previously an all appointed board until a 2023 constitutional amendment was passed. So it was actually about, I believe, raising the Homestead exemption, but had a provision in there that would require the election of three members of that board. We had eight to begin with, and it will still be eight. It's now five appointed, three elected.

In nonpartisan elections, only four counties of 75,000 people and up, which obviously includes Harris. Give me your overview of how you think the HCAD, the board of directors, is performing now and what would be your priorities if you are elected?

Jesus Nieto

Yeah, performing now, I mean, I think that we can do a lot better, especially in Harris County. We are the biggest county in the state of Texas, and we're just so diverse. We have different communities, you know, from Katy all the way to Baytown.

You know, we need individuals on that board that are going to be proactive, not just in trying to move this board forward, but also move the community forward in bringing resources to them. Like, we are currently in a affordability crisis, not just in Harris County, in the state of Texas, but across this country, right? We need our public officials to be proactive and meet people where they are, right?

Like, we need to go to them. We cannot expect them to find information when they're going through so much in their lives. So I want to make sure that I'm on that board to be an advocate for everyday people across this county and make sure that we're doing better, because I believe that we can do better, and taxpayers in Harris County deserve better. So, you know, that's what I would say about the performance.

And I also just want to comment about that law. A lot of people don't know that that's what occurred, and the Republican Party is very sneaky. And, you know, they did that on purpose. You know, they targeted the super populated counties for a reason, right? Governor Abbott has said that he's consistently going to continue to find ways to defund public education.

And, you know, I believe that this is a way that they're going to continue to do that, right? From an outside point of view, you might not think HCAD relates anything to public schools, but in reality it does,

because HCAD has oversight over the chief appraiser, which sets the rules of taxing units in the county. And some of those taxing units are what, you guessed it, public school districts.

And, you know, that appraisal value is what is used to calculate public school funding for those school districts. And, you know, I want to make sure that I'm advocating for those public schools and make sure that they get, you know, at least whatever local funding that they have left. You know, because we obviously are seeing that the state is not going to support them if they win this November.

Charles Kuffner

I mean, one of the duties of the appraisal district board is relatively limited. You know, I'm going to talk about two of them. The first one is that you have the authority to hire and fire the chief appraiser. So what is your assessment of the chief appraiser in Harris County?

Jesus Nieto

So I haven't really looked into the past, you know, actions of the chief appraiser. However, you know, if elected, I will be taking a look, a hard look, and honestly talking to other colleagues that are going to be there, because I'm assuming the appointed members are not going to be, like, their term isn't up yet. So I'm going to be talking and having conversations with them and asking hard questions that, you know, a lot of people probably want answers to.

I would say that when it comes to the chief appraiser, like, they need to be doing a fair and equitable job for all of Harris County residents. You know, I'm definitely going to be an advocate for not giving any special, you know, leeways to any corporations. We need to make sure that we're working for Harris County taxpayers. So if the chief appraiser is doing anything that doesn't align with that, then that's definitely, you're definitely going to be hearing from me.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. I mean, another main duty is appointing the members of the appraisal review board, who handles, I believe, protests of property tax appraisals. What's your, you know, what's your view on this? How is it going? And what do you see as opportunities for improvement?

Jesus Nieto

Yeah, this is probably, like, one of the key points as to why, like, I want, you know, why I'm running is the appraisal review board, I think, and because we have the ability to vote on the appointments, I think that we really need to be looking at candidates that are going to be impartial, right? Like, I don't come from, like, a fancy real estate agency or, like, come from industry. I want to make sure that these individuals that we appoint are going to be unbiased to homeowners or to any individual that comes across the appraisal review board.

And again, not give any special leeway to any type of company or business that might come through and, you know, have the ability to push their way. I just want to make sure that we appoint people that are

going to be doing the job effectively. So finding candidates that are, you know, that have the experience, have the background to support that review board would be something that I would be pushing for.

Charles Kuffner

Do you think HCAD should do more in terms of public outreach, public education, in terms of what it does and how people can interact with it? I mean, I feel like it's a relatively small number of people that ever interact with HCAD.

Jesus Nieto

Yeah, you know, and the thing is, like, not a lot of people, I can guarantee you that majority of Harris County residents have no idea, you know, where to even go, right, until you get that letter in the mail about, like, oh, do you want to protest your appraisal value? You have to go through this loop and in that loop. Yes, the answer is yes. We need to do more outreach to the community. Like I said at the beginning, we need to meet people where they are. We cannot expect them to know everything, especially with how outdated this website is.

If you've taken a look at the HCAD website, it is very, very outdated. You know, there's links here, links there, links there, different tab here. It's just I can imagine how a first time homeowner, which a lot of my friends are, if they have to go through a process like that, they can probably feel overwhelmed and stressed and eventually might not even be able to go through the entire protest process because they just don't understand. Right?

So I am going to be definitely pushing for modernizing the website and pushing for more community events, investing in programs that have the district staff actually go out into the community. And especially during those peak times where people are requesting, you know, through the appraisal review board or whenever they're getting all that information through the mail, definitely be out in the community.

So those are probably the two things that I'm going to be definitely advocating for and hopefully talking to my other colleagues on the board to get them to, you know, pressure and push that too. Because, again, I'm only one person on the board of eight, technically nine with the tax assessor, but they're a non-voting member. You know, hopefully with their support, we can get something passed on the policy side because you need a majority in order to do that.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. As noted, this is a nonpartisan race. I mean, I suppose technically, in some sense, it's a special election because there's more than two candidates. You know, but as you noted, this is still being run in a partisan context. This is an even number year. There's a lot of, you know, Rs and Ds on the ballot.

How are you approaching the campaign? Are you working with, you know, or, you know, working alongside other democratic campaigns, you know, working, you know, to get other people elected in addition to yourself?

Jesus Nieto

Yeah. You know, I am supporting a lot of candidates. You know, hopefully they get elected this November. I'm working alongside different, you know, community groups and reaching out to folks. I'm at the bottom of the ballot. So that does, you know, what we have to rely on is making sure that people know our name, you know, and making sure that this is a position that they need to vote for because it is important, even though not a lot of people know about it.

You know, so what we're relying on is the top of the ticket really pushing out the Democratic vote, because if you remember what happened last time that this election occurred, the Democratic base did not turn out, which is why we got two out of the three elected positions go to the GOP side of the aisle.

So I'm going to be doing a lot of, what is it called, the social media outreach. I'm going to have a huge social media campaign, try to make sure that the word gets out that way to educate folks about what this board does and how that they can get involved. I'm going to be definitely going to a bunch of community events.

There's one literally every day. So I've been trying my best going out to different Democratic clubs, different civic clubs, try to talk to people, let them know about it. And that's what I'm going to continue to do until November 3rd.

Charles Kuffner

Well, as you do that, you've got two opponents in this race, one of whom is the incumbent. The other is, I believe, another Democratic candidate. When you talk to people and ask for their vote on November 3rd or during early voting, what do you tell them? Why should they vote for you for this position on the HCAD board of directors and not one of your opponents?

Jesus Nieto

Yeah. One of the main things that I say is that I'm a fresh face. It's time for fresh leadership in Harris County.

And it's also an opportunity to win back a seat that the Harris GOP has tried to invest in to keep control. You know, if they want somebody that's going to be a champion for everyday working people of Harris County, then they should vote for Jesus Nieto, because I'm going to go in there and bring a different approach to what you've seen from what you have seen elected in Harris County navigate through. Right? So I want to make sure that I'm going to be championing people over special interests.

Charles Kuffner

OK. Jesus Nieto, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

Jesus Nieto

I appreciate that. Thank you.