NEWS

"Every time I say, 'no' my kid hears: 'ask again, she didn't understand the question."
SARAH COTTRELL INSTAGRAM INFLUENCER

At debate, mayoral candidates spar over immigration, crime

BY ELIJAH HUREWITZ-RAVITCH AND JOLYNDA WANG
STAFF AND CONTRIBUTING REPORTERS

Mayor Justin Elicker and Republican mayoral challenger Steve Orosco squared off in a debate under the bright lights of the Cooperative Arts and Humanities High School's Main Stage Theater on Tuesday evening.

As the crowd cheered and hissed, the candidates traded barbs while trying to stick to their respective messages.

The debate, the first of the campaign, was attended by about 180 people and organized by the New Haven Democracy Fund, a public campaign finance program established in 2007. Thomas Breen, the editor of the New Haven Independent, moderated. Local journalists and radio hosts Babz Rawls-Ivy, Norma Rodriguez-Reyes and Vinnie Penn also asked the candidates questions.

Elicker, a third-term Democratic incumbent, and Orosco, a businessman and former mixed martial arts fighter, diverged sharply on several issues including immigration, crime, homelessness and education.

Asked what New Haven should do in response to the federal crackdown on undocumented immigrants, Orosco said that federal law "always supersedes local law."

"There's not much you can do as a local municipality if ICE or ATF or FBI and DEA come into your city," Orosco said, referring to various federal law enforcement agencies. "I truly believe that ICE should not be an issue."

Elicker responded with indignation, citing the story of Esdrás Zabaleta-Ramirez, an 18-year-old Wilbur Cross High School student arrested by federal immigration agents in July and released in early September.

"We need to be a city that stands up for supporting people that are productive members of our community." Elicker said.

Addressing the recent spate of violent crimes, Elicker maintained that New Haven was "making progress" on public safety.

But Orosco accused Elicker of "defunding the police" and said that if elected, he would "fully fund the police at all costs." He also pledged to require all police officers to get blue belts in Brazilian jiujitsu, which he said would improve deescalation tactics.

Elicker disputed the notion that he had defunded the police and pointed to recent increases in New Haven Police Department funding.

He framed struggles to address NHPD staffing shortages as a national challenge which "communities around the nation have been struggling with since the murder of George Floyd" in 2020.

Asked how he would respond if President Donald Trump sent the National Guard to New Haven, Elicker said the National Guard is "not needed nor welcome in New Haven."

"At some point, yes, the National Guard could be needed if Mayor Elicker doesn't fix this city," Orosco said. Several audience members yelled "No!" at the stage.

The candidates were similarly split on their view of New Haven's public schools.

"Everyone in this room knows that the New Haven public school system is failing our children," Orosco said. "Our kids can't read, our kids can't do math, so at some point we need to change the whole entire curriculum."

The mayor automatically receives a seat on the Board of Education and appoints four of its voting members. Orosco said that if elected, he would relinquish his seat and move to make all seats of the body elected positions.

Elicker acknowledged the long-standing problems plaguing the city's schools but discussed progress made during his five-year tenure: decreased rates of absenteeism, improved student scores in math and reading, and increased funding for the Board of Education.

On combating homelessness, the mayor praised the city's shelters but stressed that New Haven "can't do it alone" and needs more support from surrounding towns.

In his response, Orosco criticized Elicker for "putting a Band-Aid" on the issue instead of addressing its causes. Orosco proposed building a professional narcotics task force to attack the fentanyl crisis.

"Until we clean the streets via police, which is what we need, homelessness isn't going to change," Orosco said.

Elicker fought back, asserting that "homelessness is not a choice."

Each candidate accused the other of deflecting responsibility instead of solving problems.

Orosco said that his opponent "likes to blame and point fingers," while Elicker criticized Orosco's rhetoric.

"If you look at his Instagram posts, every single Instagram post is about blaming and pointing fingers and negativity, and that is not what we need in New Haven," he said.

Elicker also attacked his challenger's engagement in New Haven.

"I've gone to hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of meetings, and I have seen Mr. Orosco once in over a decade of heavy involvement in the city," Elicker said. "We need someone that doesn't just run for office all the time. We need someone that does, and that's what I am."

Ultimately, the candidates presented starkly different visions of New Haven.

Orosco painted a picture of a community in decline.

"The city is falling apart," he said. "Crime is through the roof. The streets aren't safe. Our education is falling apart. We're short in every single department."



JOLYNDA WANG / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Mayor Justin Elicker defended his record, while challenger Steve Orosco criticized his opponent for failing to solve longstanding issues in the city.

Elicker, meanwhile, touted his administration's accomplishments. He doubled down on his vision of New Haven's progressive values, which he said stand in contrast to those of the Trump administration.

"We are the most welcoming city in our nation, and we really pride ourselves in making sure that we welcome everyone, no matter what you look like, what your document status is, what your economic situation is," Elicker said.

As the audience filed out of the theater, Elicker told the News that "debates are always a little stressful" and added, "I feel good."

Orosco said in an interview that the debate "was just like a fight. Get the jitters — why am I doing this? But just like a fight, when the bell goes off, you kind of just autopilot."

Joe Fekieta, who lives in the Hill, told the News that he plans to vote for Orosco but thought Elicker, as the sitting mayor, made for a formidable debate opponent because of the information and detail at his disposal.

Mariellen Chapdelaine, another Hill resident, supports the current mayor.

She said that Orosco took "a lot of opportunities to put Elicker down. He couldn't help but spit something negative every time he spoke, and that got on my nerves."

New Haven's mayoral general election will be held on Nov. 4.

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Climate tech leaders energized despite federal cutbacks

BY KINNIA CHEUK
STAFF REPORTER

Signatures from the founders of local climate startups pepper a wall at the office of ClimateHaven, the city's Yale-backed incubator for green ventures. Ryan Dings, ClimateHaven's president, stood opposite that wall Wednesday as he spoke to 20 people in the sustainability industry about how climate tech entrepreneurs can raise capital.

Freshly back from ClimateHaven's first-ever event at Climate Week NYC, the second-largest climate gathering worldwide, Dings hoped to help Connecticut's climate startups navigate decreasing market enthusiasm for green ventures.

President Donald Trump's victory last November and his subsequent rollback of federal support for green technologies, including ending clean energy subsidies and slashing environmental research funds, have thrown the climate world into uncertainty.

Climate venture investment from April to June 2025 hit its lowest point since the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, according to data from Sightline Climate. Currently, ClimateHaven is adjusting to the loss of a $1 million federal grant from the Department of Energy, which was frozen earlier this year.

Despite the recent political and macroeconomic headwinds, the climate tech scene in New Haven has remained energized.

Since its founding in late 2023, ClimateHaven has helped more than 20 startups. In August, Yale announced the launch of the Planetary Solutions Impact Accelerator, which will provide six climate startups with $100,000 to $250,000 apiece in grant funding, Yale Ventures Managing Director Josh Geballe '97 SOM '02 said.

The News spoke with ClimateHaven leadership, local startup founders and industry experts about how the city's burgeoning climate tech sector is navigating the downturn in climate venture funding and the loss of federal support.

ClimateHaven loses federal funding

Direct cuts to ClimateHaven's budget may delay its services for the development of New Haven startups, Regina Sung '25, an associate at ClimateHaven, said.

In December, ClimateHaven received a $1 million Department of Energy grant to provide business support to sustainable climate tech startups in the city.

ClimateHaven scheduled follow-up meetings with the Department of Energy at the start of 2025 to finalize grant documents, but the Department of Energy canceled those meetings without explanation, Sung said.

According to Sung, since losing the grant, ClimateHaven has downsized internally and cut down on networking events for entrepreneurs.

"We've been greatly affected. That's kind of undeniable," Sung said. "That definitely took a toll on our programming and community aspect."

With a smaller team, ClimateHaven has adopted stricter guidelines about whether to let a new startup join, Sung said.

The company hopes to maintain its support for the existing startups in its portfolio while still expanding, she added.

ClimateHaven is now looking for other loans, support from corporate partners and private philanthropy to fill the gap in federal funding, according to Sung.

The company fills a niche in New Haven's burgeoning climate tech industry. Many startups launched through Yale Ventures, the University's innovation hub, find mentorship and industry partners needed to scale their technologies through ClimateHaven, per Geballe.

"We've seen a lot of success with ClimateHaven, both in helping advance these early stage startups and keeping them local so they can stay close to Yale and benefit from those connections," he said.

The climate tech slump

In 2021, the climate venture capital market was flourishing amid low interest rates and the passage of Biden's Inflation Reduction Act, which provided billions of dollars of incentives for green technology.

"There was this perception that if you had some level of innovation, even minor, there was a plenty big market and enough momentum behind the climate movement to actually make a successful business," Perry Bakas SOM '24, the co-founder of Oxylus Energy, a methanol production startup under ClimateHaven, said.

But in the few years since then, climate entrepreneurs have struggled to raise capital, not only because of recent policy shifts in Washington, but also because of post-pandemic increases in interest rates that dampened market enthusiasm, Drew D'Alelio GRD '22 SOM '22, who runs the $100 million ClimateTech Fund under Connecticut Innovations, the state's independent venture capital fund, said.

Climate tech startup funding slowed internationally in both 2023 and 2024, according to PwC analyses. In the first half of 2025, climate tech venture and growth investment worldwide dropped 19 percent compared to the same period last year, according to data from Sightline Climate.

Since July, the passage of Trump's megabill has played a role in market uncertainty, Kevin Gallagher '21, the founder of Decarb Energy Partners, a water treatment startup under ClimateHaven, said.

But Gallagher believes this market volatility does not involve actual binary risk or "company-killing problems."

D'Alelio believes that climate startups are not in as bad a state as the industry expected after Trump's election — but it's still too early to tell for sure.

While the best startups are still raising money successfully, a lot of fledgling companies are getting pushed out of the industry because investors are seeking less risky investments. Having breakthrough technology is no longer enough to succeed in the venture capital sphere, Bakas said.

"The amount of money you can raise without deep commercial traction has shrunk quite a bit," he said.

Many investors are doubling down on spending on the startups in their portfolio to keep them afloat amid political uncertainty, he added.

Marketing is key

In an era of polarizing buzzwords, local climate entrepreneurs said half the challenge is to market their product in the "right way."

In 2025, discussions within ClimateHaven revolved around reframing the company's and its startups' work to align them with the current political context and access more funding sources, Sung said.

ClimateHaven reworked its tagline, removing buzzwords like "community-centered" that Sung said have acquired negative connotations under the Trump administration. Currently, the tagline spotlights "energy and climate resilience."

A March report by investment firm Carlyle found that energy security concerns drive decision-making around energy sources much more than environmental issues.

Instead of "decarbonize," Oxylus Energy now uses "defossilize" in its grant applications, Bakas said.

"Pretty much every grant application you put out is being run through a filter because there are words that are now non grata in the granting world," he said.

The applications also focus on strengthening America's position in energy security, revitalizing "the economic heartland" and bringing back jobs that will be depleted in oil and gas sectors, Bakas said.

By emphasizing the universal dangers of PFAS, or forever chemicals, in wastewater, Decarb Energy Partners achieved bipartisan buy-in for their solution to the water technology issue, Gallagher said.

"It's like crafting a narrative to make sure that folks know you're doing it for the right reasons, and you're aligned with what they want to happen and communicate to their constituency," he said.

Since the start of 2025, ClimateHaven has scaled up programming for its entrepreneurs to learn how to craft desirable narratives and diversify their grant sources. In June, the company hosted a workshop with Scout Climate, an AI grant writing service, on navigating cuts in federal funding and tailoring grant applications to the current political context.

Practicality wins

Recent political and economic turbulence has sparked a more practical way of managing climate startups, according to D'Alelio, Dings, Bakas and Gallagher.

Investors are now more economically cautious due to the "unsustainable" hype around climate tech dying down in the past few years, D'Alelio said.

The challenge for ClimateHaven, Dings said, is to ensure that entrepreneurs are solving customers' problems, building out market-based financial plans and not assuming that the moral imperative will drive purchasing decisions.

"That value proposition could be return on investment, it could be enhanced performance, it could be reducing risk," Dings said. "But your value proposition cannot be lowering carbon emissions."

Many in New Haven's climate tech industry find this emphasis on market-based solutions beneficial for startups in the long run, D'Alelio, Bakas and Gallagher said.

"We all have to recognize that low carbon products have to be based on market fundamentals and have to ultimately be sold to companies and to customers that are as interested in their own profit motive as they are in planetary health," Bakas said.

To customers and investors, Bakas focuses on the inevitability of Oxylus's technology taking over a trillion-dollar market. By converting recycled carbon dioxide waste into methanol, Oxylus Energy has a greener and cheaper method to make one of the largest commodity chemicals on Earth, he said.

Third-party analyses have shown that once Oxylus's technology works at scale, it is going to beat biomethanol prices, regardless of electricity input, Bakas said.

Despite the federal government pulling back on sustainability, New Haven and Connecticut's climate tech scene remains supported on multiple fronts by Yale Ventures, ClimateHaven and the state, Gallagher said, citing ClimateHaven's 2024 partnership with the Regional Water Authority to build a water innovation hub.

With time, the city's climate tech scene is looking to catch up to New Haven's booming biotech industry.

"In the biotech community, here in New Haven, it probably took 20 to 30 years to get to where we are now," Geballe said. "But we've had great success, and I'm very confident that we'll see similar steady progress in the climate tech industry in New Haven as well."

Existing physical infrastructure for biotech is also helping climate tech expand more quickly in New Haven, Geballe said.

ClimateHaven established a partnership with local lab BioLabs New Haven that would allow startups to access BioLabs laboratory spaces in 2024. Prototyping spaces are also available in ClimateHaven's office, and the company collaborates with local nonprofit MakeHaven to refine prototypes.

ClimateHaven is located at 770 Chapel St.

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