

Saint Albans Messenger

Senate hopefuls square off on issues

Written By Michelle Monroe

Thursday, October 02, 2008

Debate held at Swanton Municipal Complex

SWANTON — About 40 people gathered Wednesday night at the Swanton Municipal Complex to hear Franklin County's four state senate candidates discuss energy, transportation, and other challenges confronting the state.

The first question concerned transportation and how to pay for needed improvements and maintenance when the transportation fund is decreasing because of a fall in gas consumption. Transportation funds come from a tax on gasoline.

Incumbent Democrat Sen. Sara Kittell said that she would have liked to see an increase in the gas tax. Vermont has the lowest gas tax in New England, Kittell said. "I don't think having a low gas tax has helped us," Kittell said.

The state treasurer is investigating the possibility of taking out a \$10 million bond to fix Vermont's transportation infrastructure, Kittell said, saying she would support such a bond.

"I wasn't able to pay for my house with cash, and most bridges last 50 to 60 years," Republican candidate Bill Rowell said, explaining his support for bonding to improve infrastructure. However, he said he would stop the state's penchant for robbing the transportation fund to pay for other things.

Republican Randy Brock's experience as state auditor showed in his answer to the question, as it did in his answers to several questions throughout the event. Brock began by discussing the difference between routine maintenance, which he compared to replacing a light bulb in a home, and capital expenditures, which he compared to adding an addition to a home.

It is ordinary maintenance that is impacted by short-term decreases in the transportation fund, Brock said, not capital expenditures. Brock said that he is concerned about accounting procedures at the Agency of Transportation and that in fiscal year 2005 the auditor's office identified \$180 million in errors in the agency's accounting.

"Things are not being dealt with as efficiently and effectively as possible," Brock said.

Capital improvements can't be paid for in one year, Brock said, mentioning that the affordability committee recently found the state could comfortably borrow upwards of \$69 million.

Democratic incumbent Sen., Don Collins also supports bonding to make infrastructure improvements and repairs, and to create jobs.

He pointed out that the only public safety funds are being taken out of the transportation fund.

Collins, who sits on the Senate Transportation Committee, said that it has been looking at federal regulations and is trying to find a way to loosen up federal requirements that can add to the cost of repairs.

As an example, he cited the replacement of guardrails on a road in Montgomery when the road was repaved. The guardrails hadn't needed replacing, Collins said, but federal regulations had required it.

A question about education and the state's slowly improving student test scores went first to Rowell, who responded, "You see a lot of these young people lose interest in school." To keep students interested more resources should be put into vocational education, Rowell said.

Brock said accountability is needed in the state's education system, but he added, "It's not that No Child Left Behind does that particularly well."

The state should not adopt hiring more administrators and curriculum experts as a solution, Brock said. Instead, he would support charter schools and vouchers. "Greater competition may achieve better results," Brock said.

Collins cited his successful efforts during the last session to make changes to the state board of education to make it more accountable, including making the commissioner an appointee of the governor instead of the board of education.

"We're losing 1,500 students per year," Collins said, saying eliminating dropouts needs to be a goal for state education. He, too, supports technical education programs, but also advocates increasing the length of the school day and the school year, especially for high school students. The latter is an issue he will again raise if he is re-elected, Collins said.

"I'm very proud of our schools in Vermont," Kittell said, pointing out that under No Child Left Behind rules state's set their own standards for achievement and Vermont has chosen to set a higher standard.

Asked whether they would vote to renew Vermont Yankee's permit, if it is certified safe by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), three of the candidates said 'yes,' with Kittell saying, "maybe."

Kittell pointed out that Vermont Yankee is "base power" available regardless of time of day or

weather, while wind and other renewables are not. Hydro and biomass are potential renewable base power sources, but until the state can get base power from a renewable source, Vermont Yankee is needed, Kittell said.

Republican candidate Bill Rowell said it would be shortsighted to take Vermont Yankee off-line, and reminded the audience that it does contribute to Vermont having a low carbon footprint. Rowell, however, did say the state should “transition out of” Vermont Yankee.

There was general agreement that negotiations with Hydro-Quebec should begin as soon as possible. Kittell, however, argued that Vermont needed to enter those negotiations from a position of strength, which required knowing what other options, including what other renewables, are available. She criticized the Douglas administration for not having a clear energy plan, adding that the governor needed to support wind power.

Asked about accountability in state government, Collins said he believes the oversight of legislative committees, and getting the heads of departments and agencies to speak on the record about the performance of their departments is key.

Kittell pointed out that on the national level the Bush administration dismantled government to the point where it didn’t function when Hurricane Katrina struck the gulf coast. She cautioned against repeating that mistake at the state level.

Kittell also criticized Republican Gov. Jim Douglas’s plan to cut state jobs, saying it was unclear how he planned to cut the jobs, other than simply not filling empty positions. Any efforts to improve the functioning of state government need to start with the workers themselves and not department heads, Kittell said.

Rowell said there needed to be more competition among state workers and a more defined objective, which he said would increase efficiency.

The large number of state workers who will be retiring in the near future presents the state with a unique opportunity to re-engineer the government without lay-offs, Brock said.

Citing the example of a person seeking assistance who had to visit five different agencies and fill out forms at each one, Brock said doing a performance audit would give the state the chance to ask, “Are you doing it in the best way possible?”

Performance audits should involve both workers and management, but be conducted by a disinterested party with no vested interest in the outcome, Brock said.

Asked about balancing development with the need to preserve the environment, Kittell and Rowell expressed support for Act 250, the state’s environmental protection law. Act 250, Kittell said, is a “living

document,” subject to revision and change.

Rowell said he would tweak Act 250 but not “scrap the system.”

“We need a government that says our job is not to force you to comply with government regulations, it’s to facilitate you complying with these regulations,” Brock said, pointing out that the obvious is that the state needs both development and to preserve the physical environment.

Collins said that people want fairness and predictability in the permitting process.

In answer to a second question about development and property rights, Rowell echoed Brock’s statement about facilitating the permitting process saying agencies should work with farmers and other landowners to balance preservation and development.

Brock said that philosophically he prefers development decisions to be made locally, but recognizes that such decisions can have a regional and even statewide impact.

“I’d like to have development projects touched as few times as possible,” Brock said, adding that he would remove some of the layers of the permitting process and consolidate reviews.

“When things drag on and on, people get frustrated and angry,” Collins said. He believes that guiding principals for development should come from the state with planning done by regional planning commissions and local governments.

Kittell pointed out that the reason review of development decisions was placed with courts was to make it fast and transparent, and that the regional planning commissions have not received the funding they were initially promised.

Asked about releasing the state’s “rainy day funds” to help Vermonters facing rising food and fuel costs, Collins said the state needs to ease anxiety by putting benchmarks in place and letting the public know that when the benchmarks are reached, certain funds will be released.

“No Vermonter should go hungry. No Vermonter should go without heat,” Brock said. However, he said that before releasing the rainy day funds the state should look for increased federal funds to re-allocation of other monies.

Calling the current economic situation “unprecedented,” Kittell said she would support an increase in funding for Vermont’s homeless shelters.

Rowell, too, said he would support increasing funds for the shelters, pointing out that with the amount of money the country spends on destruction funds should be available to house people who need it.

Brock gave a more qualified answer, saying that there are numerous state programs, which provide needed assistance and a single program should not be looked at in isolation from the others. The ultimate goal should be protection of people who need it, Brock said.

Collins would support increasing funds for homeless shelters, but he added that the current economic crisis requires regional and local efforts as well, pointing to local programs already underway in Franklin County.

On the subject of health care, Rowell suggested that Vermonters should be able to purchase insurance from a wider variety of sources, including out-of-state companies.

Brock said managing diseases such as diabetes would help reduce the costs of chronic care, which often costs the most money.

Brock also said there is “waste, fraud, error and abuse in Medicaid.”

Collins cited prevention, reducing the number of forms being filled out by practitioners, and reducing the costs of big-ticket items such as chronic care, as part of the solution to the problem of health care costs.

“We’re the only industrialized country in the world without universal health care,” Kittell said, stating that she is looking forward to having a new administration in Washington. Until the federal government implements a universal plan, Vermont needs to continue its efforts to provide insurance to Vermonters with the Catamount program and Dr. Dynosaur, Kittell said.

The legislature is also looking at the Veterans Administration as a model for health care, since its more coordinated approach enables it to operate at a lower cost.