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State and county candidates impress voters at forum

Hopefuls discuss views on school vouchers, taxes

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Elena Rush said she didn't hear anything that would sway her vote during Monday night's candidate forum at the Spartanburg County Headquarters Library.

And she heard plenty - from some humorous comments by Democratic state Senate District 13 candidate Jimmy Tobias to repeated rants against the "liberal media" by Republican House District 38 candidate Joey Millwood, to often serious and thoughtful debate on a host of questions.

"I was encouraged to hear the caliber of candidates we have," Rush said. "It's a high-caliber group."

Ten candidates for the state Legislature and the two candidates for Spartanburg County Coroner shared the stage. The candidates who participated, in addition to Tobias and Millwood, were: Mike Gardner (Republican, Senate District 11); Shane Martin (Republican, Senate District 13); Derham Cole Jr. (Republican, House District 32); Will Rothschild (Democrat, House District 32); Rep. Lanny Littlejohn (Republican, House District 33); Weldon Davis (Democrat, House District 33); Eric Hayler (Democrat, House District 37); Steve Parker (Republican, House District 37); Paula "Punky" Brewster (Democrat, Coroner); and Rusty Clevenger (Republican, Coroner).

Sen. Glenn Reese, the Democratic incumbent in District 11, had his own event



Alex C. Hicks Jr./alex.hicks@shj.com
Richard Mahler, 18, pays attention as the candidates discuss school vouchers, drilling for oil and the cigarette tax during Monday's forum at the Spartanburg headquarters library.

Monday night and did not attend. Mark Chambers, the Democratic candidate in House District 38, also did not attend.

All candidates received one minute to answer questions from the three-person panel consisting of News Channel 7's Tom Crabtree, Leon Russ of the Hometown News and Jason Spencer of the Herald-Journal. All but three questions went to legislative candidates.

The legislative candidates were almost unanimous in saying they would oppose giving public money to parents to send their children to private schools either through vouchers or tax credits. Millwood was the lone dissenter, saying he would support a tax-credit plan.

"Spartanburg County has some great (public) schools," Millwood said. "But South Carolina can't be judged by what Spartanburg County does."

Cole said he was a product of public schools, and he remains a strong supporter. But he acknowledged there is room for improvement.

"One place to start is by making sure the money we're spending reaches the classroom," he said.

Rothschild said vouchers were a "risky" proposition. He said he preferred open public school enrollment and giving options such as the magnet-school format that Spartanburg District 7 is using.

"I want real choice, not just choice for a select few," he said.

Candidates were almost equally split on whether they would have supported a bill last session to raise the state's lowest-in-the-nation cigarette tax. Littlejohn, who voted in favor of the bill, said smokers cost taxpayers \$700 million in health-related expenses.

"That's what you pay for smokers," Littlejohn said, pointing at the crowd of about 200.

Davis said he would have voted for the plan, and would have used the money to help small businesses provide insurance to their employees. Hayler also said he would have supported the bill, but it would have been the only tax increase he would have backed.

"I'm the lean candidate," he said. "I favor doing more with less."

Parker said he would not have voted for the bill. He said he doesn't favor increasing any taxes. He would prefer to cut.

"I think you have to be real careful with selective taxing," he said.

Candidates also were split on whether they backed Gov. Mark Sanford in his opposition to drilling for oil off the coast of South Carolina. Gardner said he was with Sanford on the issue.

"There are many other things we can do. We need to look at all the alternatives and have a strategic economic plan," he said.

Tobias was at the other end of the spectrum. He said he's seen rigs off the coast of Louisiana and Florida, and "they aren't bothering anybody."

Martin found himself in the middle. He said the U.S. needs to reduce its dependence on foreign oil, but that there must be a plan in place.

"If that plan includes offshore drilling, then that's what we should do," Martin said.

The coroner candidates had similar ideas on how to modernize the office without increasing the budget. Both Brewster and Clevenger said they would prefer using digital cameras, eliminating the cost of film and processing.

While it took awhile for the legislative candidates to answer each question, Mary Heatherly said she enjoyed the format. She said it allowed voters to get a look at all of the candidates.

"I think it showed the differences in the people who are willing to make sacrifices to serve," Heatherly said.

"We got to see where the candidates stand, and we've got to hold them to it."

Upstate Forever, the League of Women Voters, radio station 107.3 JAMZ, News Channel 7, the Spartanburg County Democratic and Republican parties, and the Herald-Journal sponsored the forum.

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