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## Bennington-4 candidates look to break from pack



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**From left, state Rep. Brian Keefe, state Rep. Cynthia Browning and Kathleen James take part in a candidate forum at Burr and Burton Academy on Monday night.**

GREG SUKIENNIK - MANCHESTER JOURNAL

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**By Greg Sukiennik, Manchester Journal**

MANCHESTER — The three candidates for the two seats in the Bennington-4 district of the Vermont House of Representatives still agree more than they disagree on many issues. But incumbent state Reps. Brian Keefe and Cynthia Browning and challenger Kathleen James worked to underscore what sets them apart from each other in a forum held Monday night at Burr and Burton Academy's Riley Center for the Arts.

James, a Democrat and first-time candidate, touted her commitment to Vermont taking a lead role in the fight against climate change and promoting the creation of green economy jobs. Browning, the longest serving member of the Northshire delegation, emphasized her understanding of policy, as well as her experience in economics and commitment to the environment. And Keefe pointed to his career legislative experience and his role in holding the line on tax increases over the past two years.

State Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan, who is unopposed in the Bennington-Rutland District representing Danby, Dorset, Landgrove, Mt. Tabor and Peru, also participated in the event, and urged voters to use both available ballots when they vote on Tuesday, Nov. 6. Voters may cast ballots for up to two

candidates, and the top two vote-getters in the Bennington-4 district will be elected.

James was called on to answer on whether she would support the "Essex" plan to impose additional taxes on fossil fuels, with those revenues returned to Vermonters on a monthly basis in the form of lower effective electric rates and per-person rebates. She said she had yet to make up her mind.

"My concern about carbon tax is if it's not carefully implemented it can be regressive so I worry about unintended consequences," James said. She said she'd be reluctant to vote for a plan that hurt working and low-income families and rural Vermonters who rely upon fossil fuels to get to work.

"I'm not trying to waffle. I truly have not made up my mind," she said.

Keefe said Vermonters already pay significant taxes to support renewable energy, and he's against a carbon tax because "it's regressive and puts us at a regional disadvantage."

"This will be a big issue next year ... because a lot of people want the carbon economy to be the framework for Vermont. They want Vermont to be cutting edge on this issue, they want to lead the nation on this issue," Keefe said. "And if you want to do that, you've got to raise some money."

Browning said she fully supports reducing use of fossil fuels, but would like to see policies that achieve that goal without hurting ordinary Vermonters. "I personally would like to eliminate some ways in which the tax code subsidizes fossil fuels," she said.

The candidates established differences among themselves on the question of how to address Vermont's continuing worker shortage.

James said family- and worker-friendly policies such as paid family leave and universal primary care could help reverse the trend of college-educated young adults leaving the state for higher-paying jobs. Instead of a quick fix, "let's look at getting a system in place that helps families," she said. She also said she felt the climate economy presents a greater opportunity than growing the creative economy in creating jobs.

Browning said training and affordable housing are essential, as is upgrading the state's telecommunications infrastructure. She said a stipend for new parents in place of a paid family leave benefit could help as well. "Vermont wants families. Vermont needs families," she said.

Keefe said he supports making the state more affordable as a means of growing opportunity, pointing to the work he had done in the Legislature to help address the "benefits cliff" as well as the success in holding the line on taxes the past two years. He also pointed to recent success in job training programs at Mount Anthony Union High School in Bennington, and to his work in trying to support incentives and training for the television and film industries in Vermont. Those industries "target that demographic directly," he said.

James reiterated support for climate economy initiatives when addressing a question about tourism promotion, and whether the state should spend more on it. Keefe said he'd support more promotional

spending "because we get a great return on it," while Browning also offered support, but James said she'd want to see more effective use of the state's tourism budget.

"I understand that tourism is the backbone of the economy, but the backbone of tourism is our environment," she said. "Let's invest in taking action on climate change."

But Keefe pointed out that he has a record of environmental stewardship as well, going back to his work for Sen. Jim Jeffords as an environmental staffer in helping the Lake Champlain Special Designation Act pass through Congress in 1990.

"To put people at ease, in the budget we passed we fully funded every single initiative that's in place for Lake Champlain this year," he said.

Another highly publicized vote that was stripped of funding in committee centered on future funding of cleanup efforts, he said, noting that it at one point proposed a meals and rooms tax that would have hit Southern Vermont businesses to help fix a Lake Champlain problem. "It was unnecessary to raise rooms and meals taxes on Manchester to send it north," he said.

The forum, moderated by Andrew McKeever, was sponsored by the Bennington County Republican and Democrat committees and by Greater Northshire Access Television, and will be made available on GNAT-TV.org.

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