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## VT Economy focus of forum

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By Cherise Madigan, Manchester Journal

MANCHESTER — Economic issues dominated the discussion at Tuesday's "State of the State" forum, organized by the Bennington County Republican Committee.

The forum brought together three local legislators — Rep. Cynthia Browning of Arlington, a democrat; Rep. Brian Keefe of Manchester, a republican; and Rep. Linda Joy Sullivan, a democrat who represents the towns of Dorset, Danby, Mt. Tabor, Landgrove, and Peru — alongside Manchester's Chief of Police Michael Hall.

Moderated by Andrew McKeever, the news director at Greater Northshire Access Television (GNAT), the forum fostered a spirited community dialogue on issues like taxes, economic development, the minimum wage, the opioid crisis, and marijuana legalization efforts.

Vermont's tax code was perhaps the most extensively discussed topic, with property taxes in particular drawing ire from panelists and audience members alike.

"Property taxes, I think, are a mess," said Keefe, in a call for simplification. "It was my first year up there [in the legislature] and I was astounded when we started talking about property taxes, and how few legislators could really explain what certain changes meant to people back home."

Beyond the complexity of Vermont's property taxes, Chief Hall noted what he sees as inherent problems within the system.

"When I see people that have worked and struggled their entire lives to own a home, and they essentially have to put it up for sale because they can't afford the property taxes on it, that signals to me that something is critically wrong," said Hall, urging legislators to seek alternate sources of state revenue.

"The dimensional thinking that's out there right now is that we have to raise taxes or we have to cut spending to actually adjust the annual pitfalls and shortfalls," Sullivan said. "The bottom line is that our state's economy has gradually changed over the past several decades, but the revenue has not kept pace with it."

So how can the legislature begin to fix the State's 'problematic' property tax system? Browning says that her coming legislation, H-538, may be a step in the right direction.

"[In H-538] I try to purify the education fund, lower the spending by about \$200 million, reduce residential property tax rates, reduce non-residential property tax rates, and shift the burden for providing support for housing and farmers to the general fund and the income tax," Browning said, noting that special provisions in the tax code need to be cut back. "My idea is that if you're really serious about tax reform you have to get rid of [special provisions] all at once, and lower the rates to have a simpler, fairer, and more effective tax code."

Beyond lessening the burden of property taxes, panelists also addressed issues of economic development in Vermont.

"We need industry in Vermont that is more prone towards clean manufacturing, and we need to bring in new businesses," Sullivan said. "Just cutting taxes is not going to happen, it's just inevitable that we need to develop business growth — we have to brand, we have to target, and we have to invest funds in marketing"

While attracting new businesses and industries to the state is a high priority, the state's struggles with youth retention also present a roadblock to development according to Keefe.

"It's a little frustrating sometimes in Bennington County watching the Albany news stations, where you see all these advertisements about these economic incentive programs that the State of New York has," Keefe said. "We can't compete with that; we're a small state."

To bolster economic development, Keefe recommended a larger focus on training opportunities for skilled workers in trade industries. Hall, however, asserted that a lack of workers was not the real issue.

"There are plenty of people around that could be working, that should be working, that are on state subsidies and social welfare, and they're bleeding our system dry," Hall said. "When was the last time you heard of someone in the State of Vermont being charged with welfare fraud? It just doesn't happen."

While some have proposed a higher minimum wage to pave the way for economic development,

Browning points out that the policy could have a negative impact on Vermont businesses.

"It's very important to understand that there's already a process in place to have some increases in the minimum wage," she said. "I'm not willing to consider proposals of additional increases until we see how what we've already put in place plays out."

"There will be more disposable income if there were an increase, which would lead to more spending," Sullivan said, highlighting the benefits of a higher minimum wage. "The 'cons' are that there will be a burden on employers, potential job loss, and there will be deterrents to businesses coming to the State of Vermont."

Continuing that sentiment, Keefe pointed out that a raise in the minimum wage could negatively impact the 'social service industry' — particularly in sectors like nursing and child care.

"Before we jump into raising the minimum wage for 15 dollars, we have to understand how it might impact a lot of the businesses and services around here that could really be harmed," he added.

Though the forum provided community members with some insight into the state of our state, panelists urged audience members to continue the conversation.

"We can only do our job when you do your job," Browning said. "Which is to come to forums like this and let us know what's on your minds."

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