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Silver Maples hosts 'An evening of civil discourse'

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By Sean Dalton, Heritage Newspapers

Residents packed the conference room to capacity at Silver Maples of Chelsea on July 6 for the first "Evening of Civil Discourse" political roundtable discussion.

U.S. Rep. Mark Schauer, D-Dist. 7, state Rep. Pam Byrnes, D-Dist. 52, County Commissioner Mark Ouimet and Chelsea Mayor Jason Lindauer were invited by event organizer Will Johnson for the nearly two-hour event.

Schauer was represented by Fran Brennan, his senior district representative, due to his visit to Afghanistan.

Lindauer focused on positive news happening in Chelsea including the recent completion of an \$11 million expansion at the Chelsea Wastewater Treatment Plant, the nearly \$70 million expansion at Chelsea Community Hospital that will be coming to fruition this summer, the creation of 55 jobs by Jaytech at the former Ann Arbor Machine facility, and expansions at Chelsea Milling Company.

Ouimet reiterated progress that he has helped make on the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners to close budget gaps through restructuring of county government and labor negotiations.

Byrnes addressed growing financial concerns at the state level.

"We have had our challenges and we will continue to have challenges," she said.

Since taking office in 2005, the state's general fund has gone from more than \$9 billion to just shy of \$7 billion, according to Byrnes.

She explained that a combination of structural reform, tax increases and cuts would be necessary to "right the ship," in the face of decline stemming from the collapse of domestic auto operations.

"For years (the economy) has been declining ... unfortunately this happened in the '60s, (and) economists said we needed diversity but we didn't do that, so now we are paying the price," she said, adding that boosting the state's agricultural industry is a start.

Byrnes said one suggestion might be establishing a services tax.

"People are consuming more services than products; we have to look at that area," she said.

Reducing tax incentives that the state has been using as a stimulus for businesses offering part-time jobs should also be looked at, she said.

Byrnes said that Michigan is bracing for another \$500 million in losses in order to make up for the federal government's failure to pass an extension to unemployment aid before recessing.

Brennan highlighted some entities in Chelsea including the Chelsea Area Chamber of Commerce and Bearclaw Coffee that have worked with Schauer's office to create jobs. Brennan said the U.S. Department of Energy will host workshops next month to train business owners interested in seeking grant funding for expansion into alternative energy markets.

Civility in politics

Chelsea resident Donna Stohl asked Byrnes and Brennan what can be done "for the apparent lack of civility at the state and national level?"

Byrnes said that her experience going door-to-door on the campaign trail has revealed "a difference in tone."

"There seems to be more anger and more unwillingness to talk," she said. "(That's) why I think that this is wonderful. I think we need to be teaching this in schools on top of civics."

Byrnes and Brennan felt that Internet anonymity was also fueling the vitriol and giving radical inflammatory opinions a "screen behind which people can hide."

Brennan said several health care town hall meetings held last summer in a number of districts across the country deteriorated into heated exchanges that tended more towards emotions than ideas.

"I think a lot of what we witnessed last summer was out of fear – fear of change," Brennan said. "What we try to do in our office is listen and acknowledge that fear."

Brennan and Byrnes both called for more opportunities like the one in Chelsea.

Fairness in application

A resident attending the quorum asked Brennan why Rep. Schauer supported the controversial campaign finance legislation known as the Disclose Act.

The Disclose Act requires all organizations making political expenditures to make public their donors.

The legislation also bans foreign-controlled corporations and government contractors from making political expenditures. It exempts organizations that have over 1 million members, have been in existence for at least a decade, and receive less than 15 percent of their funding from corporations.

Brennan said the Disclose Act was important to pass in light of the U.S. Supreme Court's 5-4 decision earlier this year to grant corporations the same speech privileges as individual persons.

"The ruling allows first amendment rights to a corporation, which I find amazing," Byrnes said. "A corporation can spend millions of dollars advertising for a specific candidate."

Brennan said Schauer has not taken campaign money from any corporation involved in appropriations efforts that he has spear-headed.

The U.S. Senate has not voted on the Disclose Act.

Qualification priorities

The candidates were asked to weigh in on whether they think someone with business experience or political experience should be elected to office regardless of party affiliation.

Ouimet said that the criteria that he considers important is a balance between the two.

"It's important to have outside experiences that you can bring to something like government, but I do think it's important that you understand government and what it can do, what it should do and what it ought not to do.

"I think if you're in one segment solely it becomes challenging to provide that kind of leadership."

Lindauer said that attitude is important and that a candidate should vie for public office to help "positively affect the lives of people."

"Some of the most effective leaders in our history have been politicians and some of our most successful business leaders have found a place in our government," he said.

Byrnes told attendees that the decision to elect their leaders is ultimately up to them, as is the necessary research and parsing of messages delivered by paid advertising in the media.

"You have to be able to maneuver in the halls of the capitol and you have to know how to get around. You have to know who the people are and you have to hit the ground running," she said. "Our economy needs some strong leadership. We have to be working with local governments to make sure that the process is facilitated when a business wants to locate in your town – you need someone who has experience doing that."

Bridging the gap

Dexter Township resident Todd Smith asked how politicians can "deal with serious differences" that exist between what he referred as two cultures in the United States.

"When we have serious philosophical differences how do we work together, acknowledge and deal with serious differences?" Smith asked.

Lindauer said that he believes in more than just two cultures in America, and he feels that the way to balance different viewpoints is to be accountable and accessible to the electorate.

Ouimet attributed communication between different ideologies as a key to the county working towards solving its \$39 million budget gap earlier this year.

He pointed out that the nine Democrats and two Republicans on the board passed restructuring policy for the county unanimously.

"It was clear that we all didn't agree," Ouimet said. "With 11 strong personalities on the board we all did not agree on what should be in and out, but we all knew that not everything was going to be in."

Byrnes warned against voting for ideologues who would create gridlock where compromise is needed.

Brennan said that in her experience the best way to gain new knowledge is to have different points of view working with each other.

"What's missing right now is that there have been camps that have been created that aren't interested in talking anymore," she said. "We need to remember that that is the essence of community – to discuss different topics with each other that we may and may not agree on and be able to leave the room and be friends."

Education crisis

Several members of the audience called for public education funding reform, including Sylvan Township resident Anne Cohmo and Chelsea Board of Education trustee Rob Turner.

"I would like to hear your opinions on what I'm calling the educational crisis," Cohmo said. "We are just in very bad shape and the ones that are suffering are kids."

Byrnes said that structural reforms – bringing government operations across the board within yearly revenues – are key to providing "essential" funding to public education.

She pointed to the fact that there is a legislative effort to investigate consolidating school districts across the state.

"We need to make sure that our focus is the children and putting money in the classrooms," Byrnes said.

Byrnes and Ouimet both pointed to the Success By Six program, which focuses on early childhood education. The program is based on the premise that a dollar spent on children under 6 years old saves \$17 over the rest of their career in the public education system.

Byrnes said that the program needs even more funding to the point where all 3- and 4-year-olds are eligible instead of only a portion of the 4-year-old population as it is now.

Byrnes said she would like to see more money allocated to financial aid after federal funding was given to Michigan with the stipulation that cuts to financial aid and other promise grants be implemented.

Turner pleaded with the officials to fix the "roller coaster of funding" that Michigan school districts are on.

"School districts continue to get unfunded mandates," he said. "This year we faced a major cut that forced us to look at taking teachers away from students in the middle of the (school) year. We need school funding reform."

Byrnes said eliminating Proposal A would require an amendment to the state constitution.

"We need to expand our tax base to services," she said. "I know people don't like that, but economists say that that is where things are going."

"You don't want to throw all of Proposal A out because of how it has performed relative to the general fund."

Other factors were to blame according to Byrnes, including declines in residential property values. She said Michigan has a yearly student migration rate that is currently nearing 30,000 students per year, which in combination with a declining birthrate is largely to blame for the public education funding woes.

"Elementary schools around the state are getting closed because there are fewer little kids to go to elementary school," Byrnes said.

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