

# Major parties gubernatorial debate recap

## Gubernatorial candidates differentiate themselves at first debate of political season

By Forrest Adams, Mathias Baden and Shannon Fiecke

In one of the first bipartisan debates of the gubernatorial election season, 20 candidates tried to differentiate themselves from other Republican, Democratic-Farmer-Labor and Independence party candidates.

On Jan. 27, the Minnesota News Council and the League of Women Voters Minnesota Education Fund sponsored, in cooperation with the Minnesota Newspaper Association and its 143rd convention, a debate between 20 of the 22 gubernatorial candidates who have filed with the Minnesota Campaign Finance Board.

The field of candidates will dwindle after the Feb. 2 party caucuses, grassroots gatherings during which eligible voters can cast ballots for their top choices for governor. Delegates will select their parties' nominees at state conventions during coming months and 12 of the candidates in the debate said they would abide by the party nominations.

### Budget

Days before the Minnesota Legislature reconvenes to face a budget deficit, ideas for addressing the state's budget woes were as varied as the political philosophies of the candidates.

Asked if as governor they would use unalotment to balance the budget in the way Gov. Tim Pawlenty did in 2009, responses fell along party lines. Solutions offered by the candidates to address budget issues ranged from raising taxes to trimming state spending.

Change was in the air and nobody advocated maintaining the status quo.

Cutting state spending was high on Republican state Sen. David Hann's mind.

"I do not think we need additional revenue," he said. "We have a spending issue that we need to deal with."

Former U.S. Sen. Mark Dayton and former DFL state Sen. Steve Kelley offered different perspectives from Hann.

"Raise taxes in the short term on the wealthiest Minnesotans," said Dayton. "They're not paying their fair share. It's not fair. It's costing our state billions of dollars. In the longer term, ... economic growth is critical."

Kelley suggested the state could implement a carbon tax, as well as raise the income tax. He conceded, however, the state could not raise taxes enough in order to close the budget gap entirely.

Independence Party candidate Tom Horner said he thought state lawmakers could look at committing "to some economic reform," including raising

the tobacco tax.

### Taxes

While many candidates called for restructuring state taxes, there was great difference on whether the budget deficit can be solved without raising taxes.

"When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority," hammered fellow Republican state Rep. Marty Seifert, former House Minority Leader.

Income tax reductions enacted when times were good should be reversed for now, said DFL state Sen. Tom Bakk, but he acknowledged "we can't raise taxes enough to solve this problem."

Overtaxing is the biggest concern for businesses, said Independence Party candidate Rob Hahn. He believes tax reform is needed and if it results in increases on the wealthy, there should be a reduction in the capital gains tax.

"We have an upside down system where government feels it's the only entity allowed to grow," said state Sen. Tom Emmer, a Republican, who took a barb at the Minneapolis City Council for laying off police officers while voting itself a raise.

Minneapolis spent one percent more, while state spending grew 12 percent, DFL Mayor R.T. Rybak responded. The city hired officers when it paid off debt, but police were taken off the streets when the state reduced aid, he said.

Some candidates pointed out that cuts at the state level have resulted in rising property taxes.

"Property taxes are the most unfair way to raise taxes," said Kelley.

There should be greater reliance on state versus local property taxes to fund things like schools and public safety, said DFL state Rep. Paul Thissen. Seifert said state aid to local government ought to be need-based, not the "hammock" it's become.

### Job Growth

Several candidates said that job growth is a long-term solution to the state's perennial budget duress.

"We have to put people back to work," Dayton said.

"We need to bring our jobs back to Minnesota. ... I do not want to take your money. I want to put money in your pocket," DFL candidate Ole Savor said, pointing to the Minnesota State Fair and a new Minnesota Vikings professional football stadium as potential drivers for new jobs.

DFL State Rep. Tom Rukavina said that people need appropriate training

and a good education. He supports education programs for first-generation immigrants to succeed in the job market, he said.

"It's about all of us coming together at a critical time and get Minnesota moving again," Rybak said.

With foreclosures on a rapid rise, Pawlenty vetoed the legislature's bill to place a moratorium on foreclosures, said Speaker of the House Margaret Anderson Kelliher, a DFLer.

"It's a jobs and property tax problem," and state government should make sure people are protected from financial corporations that might "prey" on them, she said.

Hahn said the state needs to create jobs, offering business incentives that will entice small businesses to hire new employees, because without jobs, people can't pay their mortgages.

Republican candidate Bill Haas said state government needs to support small businesses.

"They're one step away from leaving this state," Haas said.

Emmer said business reforms are crucial to "returning Minnesota back to prosperity" and "making Minnesota competitive again."

Two ways the state can assist small businesses are implementing "strategic subsidized wages" and healthcare reform, DFL candidate Susan Gaertner said.

Thissen pointed to unemployed people and supported general assistance medical care (GAMC), the cut of which he called Pawlenty's worst decision. "We can get them back to work if we provide them healthcare," Thissen said.

"We need to take care of those who are not able to take care of themselves," Independence Party candidate John Uldrich said.

Gaertner called economic development the No. 1 job of government. Infrastructure like roads and bridges, as well as enhancing an already highly educated workforce are key, she said. "It's hard to talk about that unless we fix this budget mess."

Roads and other infrastructure spending can get people back to work in the short term, just like the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects of the 1930s, John Marty said, but government isn't the only driver of jobs.

### Healthcare

There were sharp differ-

ences on healthcare — and whether the state or the market is the solution to rising costs.

Republican candidate Phil Herwig said tort reform is needed and government should get out of healthcare, noting that insurance coverage is mandated to cover hair wigs and drug therapy.

If government gets out of healthcare, who will take care of the poorest of the poor? responded Democrat Rep. Tom Rukavina of Virginia.

"What do you want to do — put them in a ditch and bury them?" Rukavina asked.

Of the "market-based approach" proffered by Seifert, Rukavina said it "hasn't worked in this country and we need to move on."

### Education Funding

A quarter century ago, Gov. Rudy Perpich called Minnesota "the brain power state." Asked if as governor of Minnesota the candidates thought state lawmakers and the governor should strive to live up to this ideal, they all voiced support for education on some level. However, with regard to the Q Comp quality compensation teacher program that bases teacher pay on student performance, the majority of the candidates said they opposed it or would make some changes to it if given the opportunity.

Gaertner said she'd be "the next education gover-

nor."

Kelley said "education is our state's highest priority."

In response to a question if as governor he'd try to ensure more people in the state graduate from college, former Speaker of the House and a frontrunner to receive his party's nomination for governor Seifert said, "It's not the job of the governor or the legislature to determine what free people are deciding."

He said as governor his No. 1 goal would be to make higher education affordable.

"Affordability will make us competitive in the 21st century," Seifert said.

Hahn added he thinks state lawmakers could improve education in the state.

### Transportation

As the conversation turned to transit and transportation, Hahn and Rybak pushed for rail projects. Hahn mentioned expanding public transportation to Duluth, as well as the southwest metro. Rybak mentioned Rochester and said he wants to "extend realistic transit options into rural Minnesota."

"It's about priorities," Emmer said, "and our priorities must be roads and bridges."

Transit, Emmer said, is subsidized to the tune of 80 cents per ride. A rail line to Duluth "went broke" and closed down in the 1970s, he added.

Kelliher said transpor-

tation funding is 20 years too late. The state is \$50 billion behind on roads and bridges, she said and \$2.5 billion behind on transit.

Kelliher said she prefers a pay-as-you-go approach to building transportation infrastructure.

Bottom line: "There's no money for any of these things," Republican candidate Leslie Davis said.

Candidates included: Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party candidates Tom Bakk, Mark Dayton, Susan Gaertner, Steve Kelley, Margaret Anderson Kelliher, John Marty, Tom Rukavina, R.T. Rybak, Ole Savor and Paul Thissen; Republican Party candidates Leslie Davis, Tom Emmer, Bill Haas, David Hann, Phil Hartwig and Marty Seifert; and Independence Party candidates Rob Hahn, Tom Horner, John Uldrich and Rahn Workkuff.

The moderators of the forum were: Al Edenloff, editor of the Echo Press in Alexandria; Gary Eichten, Minnesota Public Radio program host and producer; and Lori Sturdevant, Star Tribune editorial writer and columnist.

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## Borrowing is option if needed

had to borrow for the last couple of years.

Hamann isn't sure if their analysis will be complete for the board's Feb. 16 meeting. They may bring bids to the March meeting, if the situation requires it.

The aid payment delay applies only to school districts, and does not apply to cooperatives, intermediate school districts or charter schools. In all, 231 of Minnesota's 337 districts will be affected. School districts will receive their normally scheduled payments on April 30 and May 15.

In their press release the state department assured the districts that the amounts delayed in March and April will be paid in full on May 30. Federal aid payments will not be delayed.

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