

At the forum

15th district candidates offer consensus

By TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Key education-related issues such as making sure local districts get their fair share of the state funding pie, allowing unlimited charter schools and restoring adult education funding were delved into Wednesday night by 15th District Senate race candidates.

But the Farmington PTA Council-sponsored "Senate Candidates Forum" at the Farmington Training Center was more consensus than debate.

Moderated by Rick Simonson, the assistant superintendent for the Oakland Intermediate School District, five candidates in the May 13 primary offered almost-identical one-minute responses to prepared questions before taking a crack at random public queries.

The format of the two-hour program was called into question more than how Republicans Willie Bullard, Ed Cox, Barbara Dobb, Terry Sever and Democrat

Barry Brickner fared. The forum will be replayed at 3 p.m. Friday on Farmington School District public access channel 10.

"These things are difficult in terms of getting at people," said West Bloomfield Schools Supt. Seymour Gretchko, among those in the audience. "Ultimately, the audience is better served if they have a chance to interact (with candidates). But that's a problem with the format."

A prevailing theme throughout the forum was with how the state should help ensure levels of state funding for districts with spiraling enrollment, such as those within the 15th District (including West Bloomfield, Walled Lake and Farmington Hills).

Keep funding fair

Veteran Farmington Hills City Councilman Sever insisted that lawmakers must stay committed to public education funding, resisting the temptation to change policies in mid-stream.

Bullard, the 38th District state

representative, and Dobb, who represents the 39th District, agreed with the need to make sure the State Foundation Grant at least mirrors the rate of inflation — something that some local district officials said was not being maintained in Gov. John Engler's original education budget.

Agreeing was Cox. "There's no question we need increased funding and we need to keep up with inflation."

"They also were in general consensus about doing away with the current system of blended pupil counts for determining funding, particularly because it penalizes fast-growing districts."

"We need to actually fund students that are here rather than half the students that are here and half the students that were here last February," Bullard said.

Several times during the night, both Bullard and Dobb emphasized there is a group of legislators opposed to the choice concept until those who move into a district at the beginning of the year are fully funded.

Dobb added a twist, suggesting that the formula could be made more fair by incorporating three student counts into the mix: two from the current year; one from the prior year.

Agreeing that making sure growing districts are fairly funded was Brickner, assured of squaring off on June 4 against the winner of the Republican primary.

"It (the foundation grant) has to at least be at the rate of inflation," he said. "And inflation is low."

Jury out on charters

The candidates concurred across the table, in answering whether the state constitution should be changed to allow public funds for private or parochial schools.

"I oppose changing the Michigan Constitution. . . I don't know how much more you can say about it except 'No,'" said Brickner, drawing crowd applause. "I don't see any compelling reason to change it at this point in time or ever."

Cox added that he isn't ready "to jump out of the status quo and change the constitution."

Consensus generally was reached on yet another topic — whether they supported establishing an unlimited number of charter schools in the state.

Most vocal was Sever, primarily because it would put too many players into the education game and subsequently leave little funding to go around.

"I have a concern when you start shifting emphasis from public schools to charter schools to private schools. . . to vouchers," Sever said. "You add to the cost overall and . . . when you start playing with all of these formulas and all of these concepts and you ring out the water, ring out the money, there's nothing dropping in the bucket."

Brickner and Bullard said they considered charter schools experimental and fair game for critics.

"Some charter schools will succeed, some will fail and the jury is out," Bullard said. "The key issue is not settling up these schools, but are they accountable. Is there a level playing field between charter schools and public schools? We should have both school systems playing by the same rules."

One area where the playing field might not be equal already is in per-pupil funding, Dobb said.

"It's so critical of an issue for the 15th District," the Commerce Township resident said. "Charter school students are counted on a current basis. . . And there is a block of legislators that have made it known they will probably withhold support for schools of choice and charter schools until we resolve this counting of pupils."



Barbara Dobb



Terry Sever

We need to count pupils for where they are today."

Dobb concurred that the performance of charter schools must be closely monitored before rushing to judgment. But she does not support unlimited charter schools.

More power to locals

The second half of the forum enabled audience members to ask the questions, including whether candidates thought the state education board's power needed to be reduced.

Offering the strongest comment was Bullard, who said he would go so far as to abolish the state board.

Dobb said the state "should not be micro-managing every one of these school districts."

Giving more power back to local districts also was agreed upon by Cox, Sever and Brickner, the latter who said "Lansing should step aside and let districts take care of their students."

Many in the audience also wanted to hear candidates' views on whether to restore adult education funding, severely slashed in the governor's original budget.

Bullard and Dobb said the focus in Lansing is to make sure high school completion and job training programs continue to be funded in the K-12 budget. But remaining components of adult education need a secondary funding source.



Barry Brickner

Serving up more pointed comments against cutting the adult education funding were Brickner and Sever.

"I thought it was a travesty to cut the funding as it was proposed," Brickner said. "We should give people a helping hand, but not hand-outs. But by cutting out adult education, you're telling these people 'Get off welfare. . . but you're not going to be educated.'"

Sever said "MEA ought to stand for More Educated Adults, because an educated society is going to cut back crime."



Willie Bullard



Ed Cox

Candidates please public with education as key issue

By TIM SMITH
STAFF WRITER

Education issues are a big deal with candidates in the 15th District Senate race, enough to warrant dedicating an entire night to them.

And that was impressive to members of the Farmington PTA Council, who hosted their first-ever such candidates forum Wednesday night. On hand to answer questions were Republican Senate hopefuls Barbara Dobb, Willie Bullard, Ed Cox, Terry Sever and Democrat Barry Brickner.

"It says they realize it's an issue with voters," said Janet Holm of the Farmington FFA Council. "Again, the reason for us wanting to sponsor this event is, education

is a very complex issue and we wanted them to have some time to discuss it."

Betty Watson, also of the PTA, said the forum was a way to bring education "to the forefront" with candidates.

"The PTA's first and foremost obligation is to be advocates for the children," Watson said, explaining why the organization wanted to host the forum on education.

After the session at the Farmington Training Center, Dobb agreed that education is a major issue in the state Senate.

"And it's an important issue to everybody in the community, job providers, parents, teachers, even so to people who don't have kids in school," Dobb said. "Every-

body feels they have a stake in the educational community."

About why the evening was reserved to discuss education, Rick Simonson, assistant superintendent for Oakland Schools, told the audience that about one-third of the state budget deals with those issues.

With the May 13 primary date approaching, candidates, meanwhile, will participate in a general forum at 7 p.m. Wednesday, at Congressman Joe Knollberg's campaign headquarters, 27877 Orchard Lake Road in Farmington Hills.

The headquarters are located in the Orchard-12 Shopping Center, at the corner of Orchard Lake and 12 Mile roads.

FARMINGTON FOCUS

Council meeting changed

Monday, May 13, is primary day in the Farmington area, and far be it for the Farmington Hills City Council to interfere with election activities.

So, to avoid conflict, the Hills Council has scratched its May 13 meeting and re-set it for Tuesday, May 14, at 7:30 p.m.

The agenda for the May 14 meeting includes the public hearing to determine the special assessment district for road rehabilitation in the Kimberly subdivision.

Also Tuesday there will be two public hearings on rezoning requests and the presentation of the Economic Development Annual Report.

The May 13 primary will eliminate three Republicans in the race for state senator in the 15th District. GOP hopefuls are: State Reps. Willie Bullard and Barbara Dobb, Hills Councilman Terry Sever and Ed Cox.

The Republican winner will face Barry Brickner, the lone Democrat, in the June 4 general election.

Attention, seniors

Farmington-area senior citizens, aged 60 and above, may obtain an identity card from the Oakland Livingstone Human Service Agency from 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Friday, May 17, at the Costick Activities Center, 28600 W. 11 Mile Road.

The card entitles seniors to discounts from various merchants. Call 473-1865 for more information.

Teacher given grant

Virginia Lambert, a Brighton resident and a teacher at North Farmington High School, received a \$200 mini-grant from the Detroit Edison Foundation.

The money will be used for a classroom project that explores the Rouge River basin and what factors affect dissolved oxygen.

Items for Farmington Focus may be mailed to the Farmington Observer, 33411 Grand River, Farmington 48335; faxed to 477-9722; or dropped off at the newspaper office.

Students put Latin America on map

By LARRY O'CONNOR
STAFF WRITER

If not physically, O.E. Dunkel Middle School students took visitors and headed south of the border in spirit.

More than 200 students culminated three weeks of studying Latin America with a journey through music, art and history presented at the school Wednesday.

Using math, science and social studies, they were able to offer a

glimpse of Latin culture.

Children made pie graphs to illustrate the terrain of Costa Rica. They made science projects to show how animals lived in the region and spinned folk tales through Language Arts.

Band and orchestra members played Latin-flavored selections for parents, siblings and friends who viewed the displays.

"The reason we selected Latin America is that kids view it as an

unknown and obscure place," teacher Karen Halberg said. "By the positive way they went about doing this, it kind of puts (Latin America) on the map for them."

Kids dove into the project, Halberg said. Many worked hard putting it together.

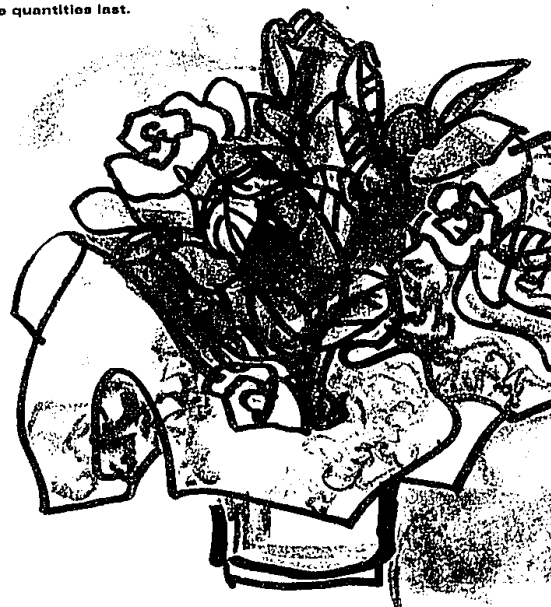
The difficult part came at the end: Deciding who would get to take the displays home.

"I called it a custody battle," Halberg said.

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