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Monongalia delegate candidates sound off on issues

Beach, Fleischauer, Shook meet editorial board

BY J. MILES LAYTON The Dominion Post

THIS IS another story in a series reporting on candidate meetings with The Dominion Post editorial board.

Democratic candidates for the state House of Delegates 44th District agreed on most issues.

Incumbent Bob Beach and challengers Alex Shook and Barbara Fleischauer answered questions from The Dominion Post editorial board Tuesday. Incumbent Charlene Marshall was invited, but she did not attend.

The four Democratic candidates and four Republican candidates are vying for four seats for the 44th District. The general election is Nov. 7. Democrats now hold three of the four seats.

The Democratic candidates found common ground on taxes and government waste. They were all cautiously supportive of gradually repealing the 5-percent sales tax on food, as Gov. Joe Manchin proposes to do by 2009.

The state takes in roughly \$25 million per percentage point of the food tax, according to the state Budget Office. With the 5 percent tax in place since January, the state estimates it will take in roughly \$125 million in 2006. The sales tax on food was reduced from 6 percent to 5 percent for many items on Jan. 1.

Beach said the state should proceed with caution when deciding whether to cut the food tax because without the revenue generated by the tax, it will be harder to pay for state programs. He favors an incremental reduction in the food tax.

Shook supports a gradual removal of the food tax and believes any tax revenue lost will be made up through increased spending power because the economy will improve. He hopes \$25 million lost per percentage point would be placed back into the economy.

Fleischauer was optimistic the state would be able to make up any revenue shortfall if the food tax is gradually reduced.

When it came to government waste and mismanagement, Shook said the state shouldn't be paying for local festivals such as Volcano Days, which cost taxpayers \$4,000, or the Leaf Peepers festival. Appropriations for highway projects should be allocated on basis of need instead of politics, he said.

"If there's

waste, I'm going to point it out," he said.

Beach said festivals and other similar projects are sometimes justified in terms of economic development. He said the state must find ways to cut waste and bring in more revenue.

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A few weeks ago, an audit concluded state officials allowed a vendor to run the Capitol's cafeteria for about eight years without a contract. The vendor didn't pay any rent, utilities or anything to the state during that time.

Beach said instead of spending "astronomical" amounts of money and time conducting numerous audits, it might be better if legislators used their powers to request audits. Shook said the audits should be done proportional to the cost and the problem they uncover.

Fleischauer said the legislature audits all state agencies, and that it is important to make sure these audits are “in-depth” instead of used as a “rubber stamp.”

Infrastructure improvements struck a common chord among the candidates. Beech said he was a sponsor of legislation that allows communities and counties to charge a wage tax to pay for infrastructure improvements. If the fee were implemented, anyone who works in the county, regardless of where they live, would pay the charge. The fee would require voter approval before going into effect.

Fleischauer said a lot of the money for road improvements comes from the federal government. She said health care costs “eat up” the state budget and force cutbacks to infrastructure work and higher education. She said a possible solution to this problem is for the county to generate its own money for roads and improvements.

Shook said the state should “reward success” in places that are growing in terms of economy and population instead of subsidizing road and infrastructure projects in places where growth is stagnant.

If elected, Shook said, he would seek a leadership post and support a strong House delegation so that this district will “have more say” during the appropriation process.

Teachers get paid more on average in neighboring states, so all three candidates support an increase in teacher pay. Beach said he favors an increase in teacher pay because “we need to keep a skilled workforce in the classroom.” Beach cited the Mercer Plan, a state mandated salary schedule. The plan seeks to raise salaries for staff employees in higher education.

Fleischauer said the way to keep and recruit good teachers is to pay them more. Shook said raising teacher pay is crucial to the economy and standard of living.

The number of ATV-related deaths in West Virginia this year is 49, the highest total in the nation. Fleischauer said there should be more regulations to keep people safe. Shook said it is hard to “legislate reckless behavior,” but he wants the manufacturers to provide additional safety training to motorists when they purchase an ATV. Beach said it is hard to “legislate common sense” but he wants to strengthen safety laws.



Bob Beach



Alex Shook



Barbara Fleischauer