

LWV CANDIDATE FORUM | HOUSE DISTRICTS 53 AND 54

Candidates debate the issues: Housing, education, health care

BY ANNA KAMINSKI
The Bulletin

Candidates for the House of Representatives in districts 53 and 54 highlighted their priorities for the next legislative session, if elected, at a forum Thursday evening hosted by the Deschutes County chapter of the League of Women Voters in conjunction with the Bend City Club.

The two seats at stake are some of the most competitive in the state. Gerry O'Brien, editor of The Bulletin, moderated the event, asking submitted questions on topics ranging from education to healthcare to campaign finance reform.

The last time the four candidates were together, a raucous crowd of supporters of Republican Michael Sipe overshadowed a forum hosted by the Bend Chamber of Commerce. Thursday's debate saw a much more subdued audience.

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Audience members watch a candidate forum featuring, from left, Judy Trego and Jason Kropf, who are running for state House District 54, and Michael Sipe and Emerson Levy, who are running for House District 53.

Forum

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Emerson Levy, a Bend lawyer and the Democratic candidate for District 53 running against Sipe, said she wants to address the workforce shortage impacting Central Oregonians and ensure those workers have housing, and she wants strengthen the region's hospitals and bolster childcare and eldercare. Levy also said she prioritizes reforming Central Oregon's water management systems.

"The system that we have to manage our water is absolutely archaic. It's first in time, first in right, and that goes back to when the West was first settled," Levy said.

Sipe, a Tumalo-based business consultant and the Republican candidate for District 53, said he wants address homelessness, repeal Measure 110, the ballot measure that decriminalized drug possession in certain amounts, and get rid of the Corporate Activities Tax, which imposes a tax on Oregon commercial activity that exceeds more than \$1 million.

Rep. Jason Kropf, a former deputy district attorney in Deschutes County, the incumbent and the Democratic candidate for District 54, said he wants to tackle the high cost of living in Bend by creating housing density and diversity by incentivizing deed-re-



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

The League of Women Voters and City Club of Central Oregon invited candidates for the House districts 53 and 54 to participate in a forum where they discussed policy goals and political stances.

stricted housing projects so people who work in Bend can live in Bend.

Judy Trego, the executive director of the Sisters Area Chamber of Commerce and the Republican candidate for District 54, said she wants to suspend Oregon's gas tax to suppress inflation. She also wants to invest in infrastructure for wildfire prevention and recovery and ensure Bend and surrounding areas maintains proper access to water.

Finance

On Thursday, the race for Oregon's governor seat ex-

ceeded \$45 million in fundraising after Nike co-founder Phil Knight donated \$1 million to Republican Christine Drazan's campaign.

Sipe, who has the highest campaign contribution total of all four candidates, said he was neutral on the issue of campaign finance reform.

"Transparency, I think, is real important. But here's the thing, we have a lot more pressing issues to pay attention to in the next legislative session than campaign finance reform," he said at Thursday's forum.

Sipe has maintained a

strong financial lead over Levy from the jump. He now has over a \$300,000 advantage over Levy's \$73,000 in total contributions.

Levy, Kropf and Trego all agreed at the forum that it is irresponsible to spend exorbitant amounts of money on campaigns. While Trego didn't expressly say she would support campaign finance reform legislation, she said if something were to be done on a state level, both parties ought to be looked at. Kropf and Levy said they would support limits on spending.

"I am fiscally conserva-

tive," Trego said at the forum Thursday. "I think it's irresponsible to spend that kind of money on campaigns."

This year's election season ignited concern for some of Sipe's previous comments on the legitimacy of the 2020 presidential election and the subsequent riots at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

Both Sipe and Trego accept the results of the election as legitimate.

"A lot of people should have voter remorse," Sipe told The Bulletin last month, "but we know who the president is."

Health care

None of the candidates fully support a statewide universal health care system. Sipe and Trego were adamantly opposed because of a lack of policy mechanism and trust in the state executive branch to follow through. Levy and Kropf didn't express complete support or opposition. Both agreed on the necessity of health care reform to create more affordable healthcare.

"We're spending a ton of money on health care right now, and we're not getting the outcomes that we should have for that amount of money we spend. If we can figure out a system where everybody can be covered, everybody has access to preventative health care and it's done in a more cost effective manner, I'm going to support that," Kropf said.

Education

On education, Trego said she wants to increase high school graduation rates as that can have positive ripple effects in the workforce. Both Kropf and Levy said they are in favor of better funding for schools and targeting resources to children who need them.

Kropf said he was also in favor of shrinking class sizes and providing mental health resources for students. Sipe is in favor of "less Department of Education and more teachers."

"I think we need less regulations, less restrictions. We need more opportunity for local control over the education of our kids. We also need to improve the opportunity for school choice," Sipe said.

Candidates also discussed Measure 114, climate change and homelessness. The League of Women Voters and Bend City Club recorded the event, and it will be posted on the league's website. Their next candidate forum will be between the candidates for Deschutes County Commission. Tony DeBone and Oliver Tatom, and Patti Adair and Morgan Schmidt will appear together at a free and open event on Thursday, Oct. 20 at 6:30 p.m. in the Deschutes County Services building.

The deadline to register to vote in Oregon is Oct. 18. Election Day 2022 is on Nov. 8.

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