

North shore legislative candidates discuss state budget issues at forum

- BY SARA PAGONES | spagones@theadvocate.com
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Candidates running for the District 77 seat in the state House told St. Tammany Parish business leaders Wednesday how they would address Louisiana's looming "fiscal cliff" if they win the Oct. 14 special election to replace Rep. John Schroder, who resigned to run for state treasurer.

The St. Tammany West Chamber of Commerce hosted the midday forum in Covington, the first public face-off in the biggest race on the parish's fall ballot.

The event drew all four candidates: Rob Maness, who has twice run for U.S. Senate; Casey Revere, the justice of the peace in Ward 2; Lisa Condrey Ward, one of the owners of the Southern Hotel who is making her first bid for public office; and Covington City Councilman Mark Wright.

Moderator Tom Meyer, a member of the chamber's political action committee, homed in on the state's fiscal woes, infrastructure and the political climate in his questions.

The candidates, all Republicans except for Ward, who lists no party, agreed that the Legislature needs to act quickly to address the looming budget shortfall when \$1.3 billion in temporary taxes expire in mid-2018.

Ward called the issue a daunting task that will require lawmakers to work across the aisle. The state will need to look at every area where it can save money and also focus on where it gets the greatest return, she said. She pointed to Medicare as an example of state spending that brings in more federal money.

Maness said the looming crisis is not a new problem and is the result of budgeting 100 percent of estimated revenue. Lawmakers on the House side tried this year to reduce that to 97 percent but didn't succeed, he said. "We have a spending problem. ... We are spending more than we are capable of generating," he said, and lawmakers need to reject tax increases.

Revere, who at 27 stressed his status as the youngest candidate, blamed perennial fiscal problems on irresponsible spending and the lack of flexibility in budgeting caused by too many dedicated funds. "We can get it figured out without raising taxes," he said.

Wright noted that because some of the anticipated revenue is estimated, the actual amount of the deficit isn't yet known. But he sounded a skeptical note on whether the problem will be resolved by looking only at spending.

Meyer also quizzed the candidates on Louisiana's dedicated funds and whether they would make any changes to them.

Maness said he wants to see a constitutional convention to deal with the issue. Not all dedicated funds are bad, he said, but others may no longer be useful. Despite that, they've continued to grow since Gov. Buddy Roemer reduced them to about 70, which he said is a reasonable number.

Revere said some dedicated funds are less important than others and common sense needs to be the guide. Legislators need to decide "what do we need right now," he said.

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Wright said most of the state's \$25 billion to \$27 billion budget is on "autopilot" because of dedicated funds, leaving the state to wrangle over about \$3.9 billion. But while Roemer reduced the number of dedicated funds from almost 200 to 78, that number has since grown to 393, he said. Only a few of those are constitutionally dedicated, Wright said, adding that it will take legislators with will power to reduce the number.

Ward said a lot of time has elapsed since the state's 1974 constitutional convention, but holding another one won't solve everything. Louisiana needs tax reform, she said. Its high corporate tax rate scares off investment and jobs even though the state doesn't reap the benefit because there are so many exemptions.

Candidates were also asked to weigh in on Louisiana's infrastructure.

Revere bemoaned the lack of investment in this part of the state, pointing to traffic backups at the Tchefuncte River bridge in his hometown of Madisonville.

Wright said a restructuring of the Department of Transportation and Development is needed and that Louisiana should look at what other states do. Only 11 percent of the gasoline tax here goes to construction, he said.

Ward called for an objective matrix to determine how infrastructure projects are handled. She said the gas tax is a use tax that drivers from outside Louisiana who use the state's roads help to pay when they fill up, but the state has failed to tie the tax to inflation.

Maness called for greater transparency in infrastructure spending. He opposed an increase in the gasoline tax because, he said, it hits the working people of the state "right where they live."

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