

Some questions for state rep candidates

By Robert Burgess - HP Opinion Maker Columnist | Posted: Wednesday, October 12, 2016 6:00 am

Thursday evening the League of Women Voters will host forums for candidates running for Michigan state representative for the Michigan 78th and 79th Districts. Kudos to the League for hosting these discussions at Berrien RESA in Berrien Springs. State representatives do not get as much attention as presidential candidates. However, the issues that our legislators in Lansing vote on do impact our day-to-day lives. With that in mind, here are some of the questions that I hope candidates for state representative address.

First, according to a recent report by Bridge Magazine, Lansing “has spent more than \$1 billion in federal anti-poverty money on college scholarships and grants since 2007, much of it going to middle- or higher-income students attending pricier private schools.” The magazine labels it “welfare money” going to “affluent families,” perhaps because it is money that is part of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families federal grant that is supposed to be a strand in the social safety net for the poor. Bridge says further that “Michigan will spend nearly \$99 million in federal anti-poverty money on scholarships and grants for college students this year, more than 10 percent of all of its federal Temporary Aid for Needy Families money.”

Now, I fully support grants in aid to students who attend Michigan’s private colleges and would not go as far as calling these grants “welfare. Still, I object to taking money that should be designated for a social safety net program for the poor and using it to benefit families that make quite a bit more than Michigan’s median income. It might be legal to divert money that otherwise is designated for Michigan’s poor. Still, this sleight of hand budgeting seems reverse Robin Hood. I would like to know what candidates who may someday vote on this budget obfuscation think.

Second, Michigan’s roads, bridges and water/sewer infrastructure are a mess. The Legislature passed legislation to fix our roads and bridges. But engineers say it is hundreds of millions of dollars less than what is needed to maintain and repair them. The citizens of Flint can tell you what happens when the water pipes go bad. Many other Michigan communities having been dealing for decades with sewage overflows after heavy rainfalls that pollute our rivers and lakes. Lake Michigan and Huron beaches are at times closed down during the peak tourist season due to high bacteria counts from overflows or runoff. I would like to know what state representative candidates suggest we do to bolster our state’s infrastructure.

Third, according to a Michigan’s Children election brief, “nearly one in four (Michigan children) live in poverty.” Michigan’s Children suggests that one way to help these kids would be “affordable, high quality child care during the early years, as well as before- and after-school and during the summer months for school-aged children that provides enriching learning environments while also supporting the needs of working parents and parents in education and employment training.” Boosting child care funding for poor families keeps parents employed or in training and keeps children safe. I would like to know if candidates would support enhancing child care for poor and working families.

Fourth, the Grand Rapids Business Journal reported last month that “Michigan’s public universities collectively have the sixth-highest in-state tuition rates in the country” and that the Legislature “has cut university funding by more than \$262 million since 2003, a 30-percent drop after adjusting for inflation.”

In the late 1970s, I enrolled in a public college with the GI Bill in hand. Tuition rates at that time were less than \$25 per credit hour at Michigan State University. This year at Michigan State, freshmen and sophomores pay \$468 per credit hour and juniors and seniors are paying \$523 per credit hour. In other words, tuition at Michigan State University costs 20 times more today than 40 years ago. What would the candidates suggest to make college more affordable for students (without robbing TANF funding for the poor because that apparently is not working)?

Honestly, I would rather have my teeth pulled by the Three Stooges with a string and a doorknob than watch another presidential mud-slinging debate.

Let’s hope the candidates for Michigan’s Legislature are asked and actually address in a respectful manner issues of import to Michigan’s voters.

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