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Political candidates answer to students in youth-led forum

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Local candidates for state office (L-R) Rep. Angela Witwer (D-Delta Township), Rep. Magoola listen as a participant asks them a question at Lansing Community College

Six state-level candidates faced what was the toughest round of questioning at a candidate forum at Lansing Community College. The candidates were asked questions by a youth-led forum.

Advocacy group Michigan's Children Candidate Forum at LCC's west campus. The candidates for state representative are:

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and Eaton county area. Congressional candidates Elissa Slotkin and Tom Barrett were invited, but did not attend.



Tim Monroe, Vice President of Highfields, Inc., one of the event's sponsors, said that the forum was an important opportunity for the candidates to directly connect with an underserved portion of their potential constituencies.

"These students represent not only their own voices, but also the voices of the future," Monroe said.

The candidates present were current Democratic State Representatives Sarah Anthony and Angela Witwer, Republican Eaton County Commissioner Jeremy Whittum, Republican Michigan House candidate John Magoola and Democratic Michigan House candidate Emily Dievendorf.

Witwer and Whittum are competing representative seat and Dievendorf a newly-redrawn 77th District seat. An 21st State Senate District. Her oppor present at the forum.

A group of students from Ingham Ac school, came armed with questions l ranging from student loan debt to ak neighborhoods. Each student sharec candidates before asking their quest given a minute to respond.

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“Her voice has stuck with me literally every day,” Anthony said. “It held me accountable so that when I was speaking to another group of people, or even if she was to come back to my office, I want to have the answer for her.”

The students’ questions, which they’d spent time in class preparing, covered some of the most hot-button issues of the midterm cycle. Sierra, a 17-year-old student from Lansing and a survivor of sexual abuse, asked the candidates what their views were on reproductive rights.

“In my experience, the trauma I endured includes mental health issues including PTSD and suicidal thoughts,” Sierra said. “Thinking about terminating a pregnancy following a sexual assault is a very difficult decision.”

The candidates’ answers invoked their own experiences as well as in their own lives. Rep. Witwer shared her own story by admitting that she too was a survivor of sexual abuse. She voiced her commitment to protecting reproductive rights.

Bringing in personal details to their answers was a common theme between the candidates, something that resonated with a 17-year-old student from Lansing.

“They kind of related to almost everything I said because they had their own thing in their lives that I had liked that.”

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Over the course of the event, the candidates discussed foster care issues, pollution and recycling, underfunding of urban schools, addiction and incarceration. A frequent goal expressed by the candidates was to reshape government funding around many of the issues the students posed.

Whittum said in his answer to a question about the pitfalls of the foster care system that many of the problems involved could be addressed with better funding for staff and resources.

“We seem to have money for a lot of things,” Whittum said. “But fixing this problem has been an epidemic. We kind of turn away from it and hope it gets better. Hope isn't a method.”

The candidates also spent time emphasizing to the students the importance of youth involvement in local and state politics and encouraging those who were old enough to vote in November.

Anthony said that she keeps a Youth Advisory Council for her office and suggested that the students shouldn't be afraid to pester their representatives for answers.

“Have you ever been asked by an elected official what you wanted to see in your neighborhood? That's the big part of this problem is that, young people, they make decisions about you without you," Anthony said.

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