

Tenth District Candidates Debate in McLean

Economic Equality Caucus hosts 10th Congressional District candidates.

By Andrea Worker
The Connection

An invitation to the opening session of the area Economic Equality Caucus at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in McLean on May 23, offered candidates for the 10th Congressional District race a more back-to-the-grassroots venue and vantage than the forums in which they have participated of late.

For starters, the setting was much more intimate than an audience-filled auditorium. Nor was there a traditional moderator, asking questions on wide-ranging topics from the candidates' knowledge of foreign affairs to their stance on the prevention of gun violence and school safety. There wasn't even a time-keeper, holding up countdown signs, or buzzing that a candidate's 30 second rebuttal had come to an end. There wasn't even that rebuttal moment, since the candidates did not appear together.

Instead, candidates and audience members crowded together in the church foyer. In between presentations by a number of local nonprofits and organizations concerned with social justice, Democratic candidates, Dan Helmer, Alison Friedman, Lindsey Davis Stover, Julia Biggins and Paul Pelletier, and Republican contender Shak Hill were afforded the opportunity to provide a more in-depth look into their backgrounds, their "key issue drivers" and their motivations for running for office. Each was a solo act, scheduled at staggered intervals and given about 15 minutes each to talk about their campaigns and answer questions.

True to the nature of the larger purpose of the gathering, the four questioners represented social and economic concerns advocated from the community. They were: Lee Powell, the Economic Equality Caucus Co-Chair; Walter Tejada, president of the Virginia Latino Leaders Council; Megan Malone, Board of Trustees member, Phillips Programs for Children and Families; and Deanna Heier, Social Concerns Committee chair at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer.

THE SAME QUESTIONS were posed to each candidate.

Acting as host and making the introductions Lee Powell got each candidate started by inquiring about their position regarding "President Trump's trickle-down economic policies," and how "would you support the well-being of American working families?"

The Democrats were unanimous in their disapproval of President Donald Trump's recently enacted Tax Bill. With the same starting point of overturning or significantly modifying the legislation, they offered slightly different approaches to creating "true tax reform, not tax cuts that will bankrupt our future," as candidate Paul Pelletier said. "With 30 years of experience, I can say that history has proven that trickle-down doesn't work."



Quizzing the candidates at the Economic Equality Caucus at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in McLean. From left: Walter Tejada, president Virginia Latino Leaders Council; caucus co-chair Lee Powell; Deanna Heier, Social Concerns Committee chair at Lutheran Church of the Redeemer; Eileen Ellsworth, CEO, Community Foundation of Northern Virginia; and Megan Malone, Board of Trustees member, Phillips Programs for Children and Families.

"Working from the foundation of a tax code that prioritizes people but encourages businesses," was Julia Biggins response. Biggins feels that Democrats are too often seen as anti-business.

Shak Hill, the lone Republican present since Rep. Barbara Comstock had not responded to the invitation, dedicated much of his time to making the case that the President's tax plan was the way to support working families. Without specifics, Hill asserted that companies were repatriating to the United States from overseas to "the tune of \$2 trillion," were reinvesting in their businesses, and thus creating more employment opportunities.

"The President is improving the economy through increased competition."

Hill cited the growth in the stock market and other economic factors that he said indicated the President's policies helping to bring an end to "stifling regulations" was creating wealth.

On the subject of infrastructure investment, Pelletier said that Trump had actually reneged on this often-repeated campaign promise. With his focus more on attacks on minorities and immigrants and "tax bills that create even bigger tax loopholes," Pelletier said "there's no more money" or impetus to work on "our eroding infrastructure."

Walter Tejada asked what policies a candidate would offer to promote economic opportunity for women and minorities. Taking the issue a step further, Tejada also asked that each share their thoughts on the "Dreamers" and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) issues, concerning the status of the children of illegal immigrants.

Again, the Democrats shared one starting point of equality and opportunity for

all, with varying degrees of specifics on how they would address these issues.

Again, Hill was the dissenting voice.

"I heard another candidate say that Trump's position on these issues is from extreme hate. I say his position is from extreme love. Love for Americans."

Acknowledging his own immigrant heritage, and expressing compassion for the immigrant population, Hill still asked "Who should we be taking care of? People who are here outside the law, or our our citizens?"

Hill did not directly respond to Deanna Heier's question "Would you support reforming and improving the basic safety net programs like Obama care?" but the Democratic candidates each outlined their approaches to ensuring quality healthcare through either a single-payer system or some type of opt-in Medicare option open for all. Alison Friedman staunchly defends programs that help provide for children in need. Citing several statistics, she said "Children across this country don't have enough to eat. Those are the federal assistances we need."

TO THE FINAL QUESTION, posed by Megan Malone, regarding public education in the context of the Trump administration and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos' policies, Hill offered that he did not see that the Federal government "had a mandate to participate in the education of our children - in fact, I prefer the government not be involved."

As a "firm believer in property rights," Hill eyes any government subsidies with a wary eye, including federal funds for education. If the issue was before him, he would prefer to see any funds "follow a child's educa-



Shak Hill was the lone Republican candidate at the forum and offered views and positions sharply contrasting with those of the Democratic contenders. But as caucus co-chair Lee Powell noted, "The audience listened with respect and interest. We can still do that in this country."

tional journey," leaving decisions up the states and to the individuals.

The Democrats, on the other hand, see investing in education as akin to investing in infrastructure.

Helmer insists that it is essential to support the educational journey before Pre-K if equal opportunity is to be had by all, and if the country can develop a workforce to meet the demands of today and tomorrow. He is also one of the Democratic candidates suggesting a National Service program where young people can work off some of their student debt.

Still carrying some \$80,000 in student loan debt, Lindsey Davis Stover is in full agreement with this proposal, as well as funding the Pell Grant system and finding other ways to make education or training beyond high school "in reach for all."

Few questions from the audience were permitted, but were related to the lack of affordable housing in Northern Virginia and in Fairfax County in particular and the changes that the Federal Communications Commission is pushing to end Net Neutrality. The candidates who received those questions answered honestly that they were as concerned as the questioner, but didn't have the answers - "At least not yet," said Helmer.

Members of the audience, when questioned following the event, were unwilling to offer any opinion on an individual candidate, but several were quick to voice disappointment that Comstock had not attended or failed to send a surrogate in her place, much like absent state Sen. Jennifer Wexton (D-33) had enlisted her colleague Del. Marcus Simon (D-53) to address the assembly. "After all," said host Lee Powell, "she already is our elected representative. She should be talking to her constituents."

Photos by Andrea Worker/The Connection