

HD 25 candidates offer contrasting solutions to state issues

Story seeks more funding for education; Leonard says spending is out of control

By Joe Moylan

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The two mountain area residents vying in state House District 25 are mostly in agreement when asked to identify the critical issues facing the state — but their solutions differ dramatically.



Last week, incumbent Tim Leonard, R-Evergreen, and challenger Tammy Story, D-Conifer, spoke with the Times about their platforms as the November election approaches. Interestingly, both candidates touched on education, transportation and environmental issues as being among the state's top priorities. And although they agree on the issues, they have very different philosophies about how to tackle them.

Story, 57, was raised in a military family, and frequent moves were a theme of her childhood. In 1987, she and her husband, Mike, who recently retired from the National Park Service, moved to Jeffco's foothills and raised two children who attended Jeffco public schools.

While her children were in school, Story began to volunteer in the classroom. Over the next 20 years, she would serve on a variety of volunteer boards, including accountability committees at both the school and district levels.

It's no surprise, then, that Story is making public education the focus of her first campaign for public office.

"There are several issues facing school funding in our state, including the 'negative factor,'" Story said. "Jeffco Public Schools was denied \$500,000 because of the negative factor, and there are elements in state statute that are in conflict with one another. We need to re-evaluate the calculation (required by Amendment 23) to ensure schools receive the funding they need."

The negative factor became a topic of conversation in the years following the recession, but it actually dates to 2000 when voters passed Amendment 23, which requires the General Assembly to provide certain increases to public school funding each year. Notably, Amendment 23 requires public school funding to increase with the annual rate of inflation plus 1 percent.

But legislators couldn't keep up with that mandate when the economy tanked in 2008. The negative factor refers to the money school district officials believe they are still owed.

In addition to her personal interest in public education, Story said residents of the district have voiced a variety of concerns about wildfire and flood mitigation, affordable housing and water conservation. If elected, Story said, she would search for new revenue streams to ensure, as an example, Jeffco communities have access resources not only to respond to wildfires or floods, but also mitigation programs to prevent those types of disasters. Story referred to a former grant program offered through the U.S. Forest Service for wildfire mitigation as an example of the type of funding stream she would try to access for Jeffco and the rest of the state.

But Leonard said that when he hears Democrats talk about re-evaluating how public schools are funded or searching for various funding streams, what they're really saying is they want to raise taxes and increase government spending.

Originally from suburban Detroit, Leonard, 55, moved to Colorado 30 years ago when he enrolled at the University of Denver to earn an MBA in real estate finance after securing a bachelor of science in business from Hillsdale College in his home state of Michigan. After an unsuccessful bid for the state Senate six years ago, Leonard in January was the overwhelming choice to fill the HD 25 vacancy left by Jon Keyser, who had resigned to embark on an unsuccessful bid for the Republican nomination for U.S. Senate.

Leonard served for 100 days of the 120-day session at the statehouse this year, and witnessed first hand what he described as an out-of-control spending problem at the Capitol by Colorado's "central planners."

"In 2010, Gov. Bill Ritter signed the largest budget Colorado has ever seen at \$18 billion," Leonard said. "Last month, Gov. Hickenlooper set a new record by signing a \$27 billion budget."

"You don't have to be a math whiz to understand that's a 50 percent increase in spending in just six years, and you don't have to be an economics major to realize that's completely unsustainable."

Instead of searching for new revenue streams, Leonard said, he would address many of Colorado's issues, including public education funding, by reining in government spending and promoting free-market principles. Despite sending his six children to Jeffco public schools, Leonard was a founding member of Golden View Classical Academy, a charter school that opened in September 2015 with 500 students and several hundred more on the wait list.

"Until recently, there was a huge anti-choice mentality in Jefferson County, and it restricted the growth of charter schools in this district," Leonard said. "Any other business in the free-market world would have continued building charter schools until there were no more children on the wait list."

Leonard also intends to advocate for the 10th Amendment by pushing back against the federal government, particularly in regard to health care and transportation, noting that all of the money generated by Colorado's gas tax is sent to Washington, D.C. The federal government then funnels some of that money back to Colorado at a rate of about 94 cents on the dollar and tries to dictate what highway projects are the highest priority, Leonard said.

"The answer from central planners is always more money, and it yields no solutions," Leonard said. "Nine billion dollars later, we're not \$1 closer to any solutions. We still have the same concerns with public education and transportation that we had before."

House District 25, which includes Conifer, Evergreen and a portion of Ken Caryl, has traditionally been a Republican stronghold. Keyser was elected in 2014 as a political newcomer, succeeding fellow Republican Cheri Gerou, who served three terms in the seat.

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