

Neville, Leonard discuss health care, other topics

Education, immigration concerns also discussed during town hall

By Sal Christ

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Health care reform, as well as education and immigration concerns, held center stage at a town hall meeting conducted by Colorado Sen. Tim Neville, R-Littleton, and State Rep. Tim Leonard, R-Evergreen, last Friday at Evergreen Fire/Rescue's Station 2.

Drawing a crowd of about two dozen people, the legislators gave an overview of the legislative process before highlighting key bills they supported in the most recent legislative session, which adjourned May 10.

"We just want to tell you about the legislative session this year — which ran from January to May — tell you about some of the bills, talk a little bit about the budget, and give you a little insight into our state legislature," said Leonard.

After explaining the legislative process and highlighting the importance of citizen testimony, Leonard and Neville delved into a wide range of topics — from public education funding and assessments to transportation and marijuana.

Among the topics that drew the greatest response from community members were concerns over liability for Public Employees' Retirement Association (PERA) pensions, free speech on campus, sanctuary cities, and the ongoing debate over the Affordable Care Act and its proposed replacements.

While attendance was small, community members seemed to share many of the same opinions about the issues. Dick Blodgett of Evergreen said he felt the town hall meeting was a success and thought that both legislators touched on the right issues, including answering questions he had about the Taxpayer's Bill of Rights.

Friday's meeting was the first time Neville and Leonard had conducted a town hall meeting together in the area.

Education

While both legislators said that two of their primary objectives during the last legislative session were increasing K-12 funding and decreasing the number of assessments given to students, audience members expressed greater concern over Jeffco Public Schools' "cries for money" and the school district's PERA liabilities.

"PERA liability in the school district is an important issue, but it's complex," said Neville. "We made this commitment (in Colorado) so that people have a retirement. ... Currently, pension liabilities are about \$1.6 billion — a \$140 million increase from the previous year — and it represents 350 percent of the average annual salary and benefits for those positions in the district. The reality is that this next year is the year to face it, and it's going to take some bending and give."

Presently, the public employee retirement account is only funded to about 62 percent with more than \$26 billion unfunded liability.

In response to audience members suggesting that Jeffco employees should increase their own PERA contributions instead of passing the burden on to taxpayers, Leonard acknowledged the impact of PERA on families across the state.

"The total PERA unfunded liabilities for every family in Colorado is getting close to \$60,000 per family," said Leonard. "If we're going to be stewards, we need to make sure there's a retirement plan that works and that's sustainable. I think we need to all be adults in the room."

Free speech

Free speech zones on college campuses were a subject that drew cheers from the crowd. Earlier this year, Neville and State Reps. Jeff Bridges and Stephen Humphrey sponsored SB 17-062, which prohibited colleges from limiting or restricting student expression in a student forum.

"I see those things as a First Amendment quarantine because it says you can have free speech in this area, but if you move out of the free speech zone you're in violation of some rule," said Neville. "I truly believe if more people are allowed to speak and be heard — on both sides of an issue — it actually decreases the likelihood that people are going to act badly."

After audience members asked about the difference between hate speech and free speech, Neville said that college students need to be prepared for the real world.

"The idea that hate speech is protected under the First Amendment is exactly that — free speech," he said. "You have to be prepared, especially on college campuses. It's a tough world out there. If you expect a trigger warning on everything, just wait until you get to real life."

Immigration

Another inflammatory subject was the potential for Colorado to be labeled a sanctuary state, wherein the state would limit its cooperation with federal immigration law and reduce the fear of deportation among undocumented immigrants.

Audience members repeatedly used the terms “illegals” and “criminal, illegal aliens” in their questions and expressed outrage at the prospect of living in a sanctuary state.

Both Neville and Leonard spoke against sanctuary cities and states, and voiced support for holding such localities liable for crimes committed by undocumented immigrants.

Health care reform

Health care reform was the weightiest topic of conversation, with many asking what could be done to repair the system.

While neither Neville nor Leonard commented on specifics about the U.S. House of Representatives’ proposed American Health Care Act — or a version of the ACHA that’s proposed by the U.S. Senate as the Better Care Reconciliation Act — both suggested the need for decreased health care costs and greater transparency about those costs.

“We have to take individual responsibility for our health and health care,” said Leonard. “I don’t think anyone up here begrudges anyone of charity when you need more health care than you can afford. The issue is all the people in the middle that are being incentivized to overuse health care.”

Though some audience members agreed, others brought up the impact of Medicaid reimbursement rates on health care providers themselves.

“Medicaid reimbursement does not make our local law enforcement sustainable,” said John Putt of Evergreen. “Our doctors and physicians are not going to be able to make a living and keep their doors open based on reimbursement rates. We’re still going to lose our health care coverage. What are you going to do about it?”

While neither legislator directly addressed Putt’s concern, Neville reiterated his vision to work on something that “allows people to have skin in the game, that allows them to be focused on what they’re actually receiving and if there’s a cost to them on it.”

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