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Democratic gubernatorial candidates talk casinos, health care and tax reform at forum



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JERREY ROBERTS
Martha Coakley speaks as another candidate, Steven Grossman, listens during a Democratic gubernatorial candidate forum Wednesday at Northampton High School.
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NORTHAMPTON — The five candidates aiming to represent the Democratic Party in the governor’s race offered differing views on tax and health care reform, education and the value of casinos at a forum Wednesday.

The candidates answered questions from local journalists and community leaders and touted their diverse backgrounds to try to win over the packed auditorium at Northampton High School. The candidates are Steven Grossman, state treasurer; Martha Coakley, attorney general; Juliette Kayyem, former assistant secretary for intergovernmental affairs at the federal Department for Homeland Security; Joseph Avellone, vice president of a bio-pharmaceutical research company and a former Wellesley selectman; and Donald Berwick, a former administrator of the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

When panelist and WFCR reporter Susan Kaplan asked the candidates whether they would vote in favor of a casino in their hometowns and what they would say to casino opponents who may see casinos in their communities, most said they wouldn’t support a casino.

Grossman was among them, but he said that the only communities that will see casinos are those that have voted to allow them. “The reason I think the people voted that they want MGM to come to Springfield is they believe that the jobs that would come to them, in a city with very high levels of unemployment, would benefit the people of the community,” he said.

Kayyem, who did not say whether she would support a casino in her hometown, said Gov. Deval Patrick faced a recession and suggested “a rigorous piece of legislation” that smartly capped the number of casinos at three, gave communities the right to vote on proposed casinos, and ensured that the revenue would support public safety in those communities to protect against adverse effects.

Avellone said he would vote no on a casino in his town. “I think when the bill was passed, the revenues were oversold and the costs were underestimated,” he said. “I think that we should allow the law to play out,” but he said it’s likely that small businesses will suffer and the jobs that will be created may be low-paying.

“I’m against casinos and for the repeal,” Berwick said. He said casinos will hurt small businesses, increase petty crime and gambling problems. “There’s an overestimate in the revenue benefit to the

commonwealth. It is absolutely for sure that it will cannibalize lottery revenue to the tune of several hundred million dollars.”



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Very well said, and absolutely correct. Our generation is paying for the total neglect that has been the norm for local government...(full comment
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Coakley said no one would want to build a casino in her community of Medford. But after being prodded twice by Kaplan and the moderator, WGBY Director of Public Affairs Jim Madigan, she answered that if there was a vote on a casino in Medford, she would probably vote no.

"It's not the first place I'd look for economic development," she said of casinos, but the Legislature and some communities have approved them. "This is what democracy is about."

Asked if the state should pursue a change from a flat income tax to a progressive income tax, only Berwick came out strongly in support of the shift.

Avellone said he did not want to raise taxes at all, while Grossman and Coakley said the progressive tax was one of a number of solutions they would consider.

"But I do not want to increase the burden, however, on anybody who can't afford it," Coakley said.

Kayyem said that while she agreed with Patrick when he proposed a progressive tax, his efforts to get it passed were unsuccessful. She said she would look at other ways to save money, from funding social services and reforming the criminal justice system to help reduce prison populations, to working with mayors to help them grow their local economies.

Asked how they would close the achievement gap among students, Kayyem, Berwick and Avellone supported increasing the availability of pre-kindergarten education.

Avellone said he would also close the gap by lengthening the school day and increasing vocational education, and he would pay for the spending by reducing the state's health care costs.

Coakley and Berwick agreed the state should be working with teachers to help them improve.

"The problem is not teachers, the solution is teachers," Berwick said. He said rather than forcing teachers to teach to standardized tests, the state should focus more on professional development to help teachers in low-level schools be better instructors.

Grossman, who has been endorsed by Northampton Mayor David J. Narkewicz

and state Sen. Stanley Rosenberg of Amherst, said the state's so-called Chapter 70 school funding formula needs to be re-examined to make it more fair.

Kayyem, Avellone, Berwick, and Coakley all said they would support tighter gun laws on both the state and federal level, and Avellone and Berwick agreed that helping keep children out of gangs will help reduce gun violence.

"At the same time, there are people in western Massachusetts who own guns, who are law-abiding people, who store them properly," Grossman said. "And I want to make sure those people are not unduly targeted.

The candidates also disagreed on whether the state should implement a single-payer health care system like Medicare. Berwick said it was "the way to go," while Grossman, Kayyem and Coakley said it was an option, but the next governor should first focus on reducing rates and improving care at community health centers. Avellone didn't support the idea, saying that reducing rates in the current system is far more important.

Candidates gave one-minute opening and closing statements. They answered 10 questions from the panelists; questions were directed to a specific candidate but all were allowed to give answers. Five questions were submitted by community groups and read by the

Thank you, John, for bringing some common sense to this issue. We taxpayers are bearing the onus for bad parenting, the cause...(full comment (<http://www.gazettenet.com/home/11587482-95/john-p-dibartolo-jr-finding-shades-of-grey-in-a-recent-school-late-start-study?#comments>))

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moderator.

Other panelists were 22News anchor Laura Hutchinson and Gazette night managing editor Stanley Moulton.

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