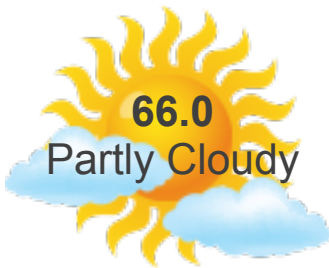


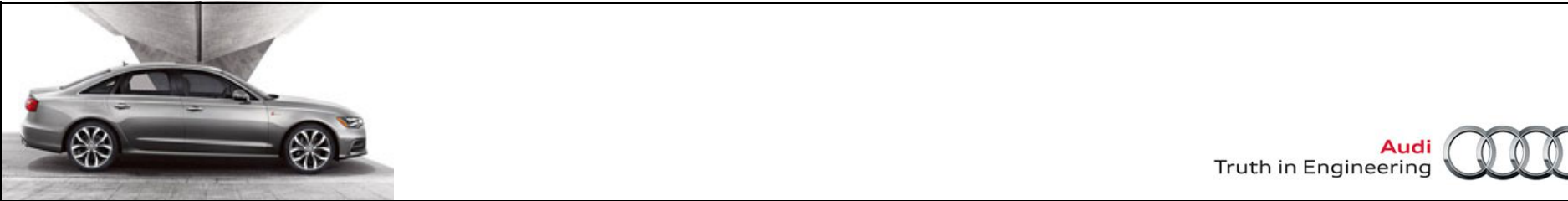
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Tuesday, April 5, 2016Tuesday, April 5, 2016

Kessler, Goodwin talk issues at gubernatorial forum



CHRIS DORST | Gazette-Mail photos

State Sen. Jeff Kessler (third from left), a Democratic candidate in West Virginia's gubernatorial primary, answers questions from a panel of students, business owners, health care advocates and energy experts during a forum Tuesday at the University of Charleston.



Former U.S. Attorney Booth Goodwin (second from right), a Democratic candidate in West Virginia's gubernatorial primary, answers questions during the forum Tuesday at UC. Billionaire businessman Jim Justice, the Democratic front-runner, and Senate President Bill Cole, a Republican running unopposed, declined to attend the forum, which focused on growing and diversifying the state's economy.

State Sen. Jeff Kessler and former U.S. Attorney Booth Goodwin, Democratic candidates in West Virginia's gubernatorial primary, agreed on Tuesday that the state's future depends on reinvesting in education, finding solutions for rampant prescription drug abuse and creating an inclusive business environment that fosters innovation and promotes economic diversity in the Mountain State.

During a forum organized by Create West Virginia on Tuesday at the University of Charleston, Kessler and Goodwin, who are in a three-way race with billionaire businessman Jim Justice, proposed similar paths forward for West Virginia, which sits at the bottom of nearly every state socioeconomic ranking and currently faces a \$238 million budget deficit.

While they shared viewpoints throughout the evening, the two candidates informed their responses to questions using different public service backgrounds: Kessler as a senator for nearly two decades, and Goodwin as the chief federal prosecutor in Southern West Virginia for five years.

"People are looking for someone to stand up and lead," Kessler said in his opening remarks. "And I'm the only one (of the candidates) who has fixed a problem within the confines of state government."

Kessler, who has represented the state's second senatorial district in Marshall County since 1997, is the current Senate minority leader. Before Republicans swept into power last election, he served five years as Senate president. He said he'd invest in people and infrastructure if elected.

Goodwin, who was appointed U.S. Attorney for West Virginia's Southern District by President Barack Obama, helped secure convictions and guilty pleas from former Massey Energy CEO Don Blankenship and six former executives of Freedom Industries, the company responsible for the 2014 Elk River chemical spill. He also targeted prescription drug abuse.

"I've solved problems our communities are facing," Goodwin said. "I have a proven record of acting in the best interest of West Virginians."

Both agreed the state's budget woes need addressed.

Kessler said tax increases are needed and touted his proposed tobacco tax, which would generate \$100 million a year for community college scholarships, drug abuse programs and workforce development.

"You can't cut your way to prosperity," he said, adding a jab at Republicans who want tax cuts and are proposing reductions in government spending to balance the state's budget.

Goodwin, while acknowledging the state's loss of tax revenue, said government needs to find ways to save money.

"We need a transparent look at spending so people can be confident when we say we need more revenue," he said. "I don't think the people are there yet."

During the forum, Kessler and Goodwin answered questions from the public and a panel of citizens, including a student, business owner, health care advocate and energy expert. Questions ranged from how they would help diversify West Virginia's economy to their thoughts on climate change and legalizing marijuana.

Both said West Virginia can't continue relying on the coal industry. Kessler said climate change is a real threat, and Goodwin said he's open to legalizing marijuana use, but wants to see what happens in other states first.

They also shared a rebuke of Jim Justice, who declined to participate in Tuesday's forum. The billionaire Greenbrier owner, once a Republican now a Democrat, has turned down numerous invitations to debate fellow candidates.

"If you aren't willing to come before the people of this state, you aren't qualified to be elected its governor," Kessler said, to much applause from the packed auditorium.

Goodwin added an "amen."

Senate President Bill Cole, a Republican running unopposed in the May 10 primary, also declined to participate Tuesday.

On April 16, all three Democrats will participate in another forum hosted by the state Democratic Party. The 11 a.m. event at the Charleston Civic Center will be televised by West Virginia Public Broadcasting.

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