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BOCC bolsters its economic development with director

By Vicky Gits, Staff Writer 5/24/2006

Candidates for governor agreed on the benefits of economic development, education and infrastructure but argued about how to pay for them in a highly caffeinated breakfast debate last week for the Castle Rock Economic Development Council.

About 130 people attended the May 17 forum at the Plum Creek Golf and Country Club in Castle Rock.

During the proceedings, a newly hired intern staff person for GOP hopeful Marc Holtzman tried to prevent a Bob Beauprez campaign worker from videotaping the event, which led to a brief shoving match. The Holtzman campaign later apologized, explaining the intern was a little overenthusiastic, said Jesse Mallory, press secretary for the campaign.

Although the November 2005 election is long over, candidates continued to duke it out over the wisdom of passing Referendum C. Referendum C lets the state keep tax money that otherwise it would be refunded to taxpayers under the Taxpayers Bill of Rights amendment.

The brunt of the debate was between Bill Ritter, the Democratic candidate, and Holtzman, a Republican. Beauprez won the Republican Party backing at the state convention Saturday, but Holtzman intends run to against Beauprez in the Aug. 12 primary by petitioning onto the ballot. Beauprez, a U.S. representative to Congress from Arvada, was not able to attend. Sen. Shawn Mitchell, a Republican from Adams County, appeared in his place.

Jim Riley, president of CREDCO, moderated the event.

Ritter launched the debate with an economic vision statement about capitalizing on the state's energy resources, such as wind power in the eastern plains, solar in the San Luis Valley and biofuel from the farms.

He defended his support for last year's voter-approved Referendum C, a measure suspending TABOR revenue limits for five years to pay for education and basic needs.

"Our lack of commitment to higher education is causing us to lose our edge," Ritter said. "You can't get by with infrastructure on the cheap."

Mitchell touted Beauprez's experience as a family man who built a dairy business and a community bank and is still married to his high school sweetheart.

"Bob has political experience," Mitchell said. "He has been there. He has lived economic development. He is comfortable with a group of farmers, businessmen and bankers. He sent his kids to public schools.

"Democrats are more interested in giving money to public employees than investing in infrastructure for economic development."

Ritter fired back saying, "It's ridiculous to say we only give money to public employees. We were in dire straits [before Referendum C]. Twenty-eight bridges were in disrepair. As a result of Referendum C about half a billion will be invested in roads and infrastructure. That's how you lure business."

Holtzman highlighted his experience as Gov. Bill Owens' secretary of technology for five years.

"I worked for many years to help Colorado evolve from a dependence on tourism and natural resources to a telecom and communications hub," Holtzman said, adding that he helped bring more than 80 tech companies to Colorado. "If I were governor I would take Colorado in that direction again."

He also defended his opposition to Referendum C.

"I am proud to be an opponent of Referendum C," Holtzman said. "We could have saved enough to beat the budget shortfall by doing other things."

Holtzman said the state's lagging transportation system has a "stranglehold on the economy."

He said Interstates 25 and 70 should be expanded where possible.

The speakers differed widely on how to reduce the state's high school dropout rate. "First you never lower your expectations," Ritter said, endorsing the idea of taking large schools and breaking them into smaller academies where teachers get to know the children better. Holtzman supports vouchers, which he said should be applied to homeschools to some extent. Mitchell said Beauprez continues to believe in testing for educational outcomes and other Owens-inspired initiatives.

Only Holtzman used the forum to take on the topic of illegal immigration.

"I am horrified that there are 400,000 illegal immigrants in the state and they use \$600 million worth of services annually," he said. "If I were the governor I will end benefits for illegal immigrants except for in an emergency."

Ritter has said he believes the government should enforce the borders, prosecute smugglers and punish businesses that knowingly hire illegal immigrants. He supports a guest-worker program, said spokesman Evan Dreyer.

Beauprez favors immigration reform, says a statement provided by his campaign. He is against sanctuary cities and urges adopting a policy covering state agencies to prevent taxes from going to services for illegal immigrants beyond what the law requires.

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