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Issues on the table - Legislative candidates stake out positions during forum

By Derek Gomes, Staff writer

PORTSMOUTH - The candidates in two contested state legislature races participated in a forum hosted by the League of Women Voters at Town Hall on Thursday night.

District 11 Sen. James Seveney, D-Portsmouth, and his Republican challenger Stephanie Calise of Bristol, as well as District 72 Rep. Ken Mendonca, R-Portsmouth, and his Democratic challenger Terri Cortvriend of Portsmouth answered questions on a broad range of topics: Line-item veto; Gun control; and Reproductive rights.

All four candidates gave varying degrees of support for a constitutional amendment giving the governor the authority to veto individual line items in the annual state budget bill.

"It will add additional dialogue and debate into the more contentious portions of the budget," said Seveney, who noted more work needs to be done on how to define it.

"It will force more thoughtful legislation and debate knowing the governor does have the ability to veto an item and to send it back down for discussion and further debate," Calise said. "It's a form of checks and balance."

Mendonca said he supports the line-item veto "in theory," but wants to scrutinize whatever legislation comes forward.

Cortvriend said based on her conversations with other legislators, she would support the legislation. Regarding her satisfaction with the gun-control laws already on the books, Cortvriend cited the recent shooting death of a Providence high school student as evidence that "we can do more." Cortvriend, who is the chairwoman of the Portsmouth School Committee, said she would have voted in favor of the bump stock ban and 'red flag' legislation. "We have to balance gun ownership with public safety," she said.

Mendonca noted his support for both bills that were signed into law, as well as the importance of the Second Amendment.

Calise said the red-flag bill, which allows law enforcement to request to temporarily remove firearms from a person deemed dangerous, undermines a person's "due process." "Without due process, that person can be considered guilty before he's had the chance, or she's had the chance, to prove otherwise," Calise said.

Seveney noted he was the sponsor of the Senate bill that banned bump stocks. "I was a weapons officer [in the Navy] ... and I understand very clearly what high-power weapons, high volume of fire, can do as we have all seen."

Mendonca and Calise labeled themselves "prolife," while supporting women's reproductive rights protected by the Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision.

Cortvriend said it is a "fundamental right of women to have control over their body" and a "right of privacy between them and their doctors."

Seveney, who said he is "pro-choice," echoed that it is a medical decision between a woman and her health-care provider. "It's a fundamental freedom that a woman has a right to decide what happens to her body. Period."

Asked for their most important legislative proposal, Calise stressed the creation of an office of the inspector general charged with rooting out waste and fraud in the state government. "We're not getting the return on investment on our taxes," she said.

Mendonca stressed that a larger portion of the school budgets in Portsmouth and Middletown needs to be covered by state funds. "In the end, the taxpayers in this room are making up the difference for the money getting funneled upstate," he said.

Cortvriend agreed with Mendonca, arguing there is an "overreliance" on property taxes to pay for the schools.

Seveney said his top priority remains establishing a consistent funding source for drug-abuse prevention, especially for children.

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The League of Women Voters Newport County forum for House District 72 and Senate District 11 candidates was held on October 4. From left are House District 72 candidates Ken Mendonca, the Republican incumbent, and his Democratic opponent, Terri Cortvriend; and Senate District 11 Sen. James Seveney, a Democrat, and his Republican opponent, Stephanie Calise.