

## Sarasota tax reform forum panelists hoping for change

By: Sara Kennedy – March 30, 2013

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They disagreed on how American tax reform should occur, but all hoped for change.

Panelists at a forum Friday veered from the flat tax to a consumption tax to the days before income tax.

There was plenty of gloom and doom, with some predicting the United States would financially implode.

But near the end, the host, U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan, injected a note of optimism when asked about the main obstacle to reform.

"I think there's a window of opportunity" to make a deal on the subject, he said during the forum in the Sainer Pavilion at New College of Florida.

Buchanan said he and others had met with President Barack Obama at the Capitol about a week ago.

"He realizes he wants to try to do what's right," Buchanan said of the president. "He knows we've got a problem with entitlements, but he said to deal with the entitlements, we've got to deal with a tax reform.

"That's why I think there's an opportunity to deal with both," said Buchanan.

"And I told the (House) speaker when I walked out of the meeting with him and others in our group, I said, 'We need to find out if there's an opportunity, and a way, to make a deal here that makes sense,'" Buchanan said. "Because if we don't slow down entitlements, we're on the road to disaster."

The Sarasota Republican referred to steadily increasing percentage of the federal budget that pays for entitlement programs, such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

Others on the panel included Neal Boortz, a former radio talk show host and author; Dan Mitchell, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a public policy research organization; Jerry Pierce, who advocates on behalf of small businesses; Susan Nilon, general manager of WSRQ radio, a radio show host and writer; and John McQuiston, a broadcast journalist who served as moderator.

The panel discussed a wide variety of philosophies on tax reform, such as abolishing income taxes altogether in favor of a consumption tax -- a tax on what people spend

instead of what they earn; a flat tax under which everyone would pay at the same rate; and whether to tax wealthy individuals at a higher rate than low-income ones.

Boortz advocated what he called the "fair tax." Replacing all current taxes altogether with a consumption tax. He said such a change would draw business investment and businesses to the U.S.

Mitchell advocated a flat tax, saying that 30 governments around the world are getting "great results."

Pierce called for a major overhaul of the tax code because "a vast majority or number of the people in the top 1 percent are paying nothing or next to nothing in taxes."

Nilon said, "We have to elicit change because what we have right now is not working," adding, "I reach for my credit card to pay my taxes."

After the forum, members of the audience aired their own opinions about taxes.

"For me, it gets down to you're still taxing income when we did not do that until 100 years ago," said Barb Rudelic, of Marion County. "It disgusts me the government takes my money."

Steve Scott, a Sarasota voting rights activist, said he was impressed by how each of the panelists had different viewpoints of the best way to accomplish tax reform.

"I don't think any one of them has all of the answers," he said, adding, "I believe they have some of the answers."