

Bennington Banner

Brock, Smith debate in Bennington

By: NEAL P. GOSWAMI - October 12, 2012

BENNINGTON -- Republican gubernatorial candidate Randy Brock outlined his campaign themes during a local debate Thursday without rebuttal from Gov. Peter Shumlin, who opted to skip the event.

Independent write-in candidate Annette Smith did participate, offering her views on the economy, regulatory environment and health care. Smith failed in her attempt to secure the Progressive Party nomination in a primary write-in campaign. She said she is continuing her long-shot bid for governor as an independent "because so many Vermonters are being burdened by so many state and federal mandates."

Brock, a state senator from Franklin County and former state auditor, used Shumlin's absence Thursday to highlight

his commitment to debating across the entire state. "People have an expectation that their candidates come to all corners of the state," he said.

Brock promised to add a sign next to each "Welcome to Vermont" sign that says "open for business." He cited a Cato Institute report that rated Vermont 47th among the state in terms of business friendliness. "The governor can say that we're open for business but you've got to be able to take that idea and bring it down through the levels of state government," he said.

Brock called for familiar GOP solutions, including reforming the state's permit and regulatory process to make it easier for entrepreneurs to start businesses. "I'm not suggesting that we want Vermont to look like New Jersey. We don't. We want Vermont to be open," he said.

State government should be creating "the kind of environment in which jobs can grow," Brock said. He suggested creating a simultaneous process for some local and state permits.

Additionally, state government must prioritize the services it offers. A decline in revenues has forced cuts to the state work force and other cuts. Some programs may no longer be worth providing at a reduced level, he said. "There may be some things below a line that you're going to have to stop doing as a government rather than do it in a mediocre fashion," he said.

Smith, meanwhile, agreed that the regulatory process needs reform, but should look to better protect the environment while streamlining the permit process. "It's really the small businesses that get hammered and so we really do need to create a system that does a better job of protecting the environment and cuts through the rigamarole," she said. Smith called for the creation of a state bank, similar to one created in North Dakota. It would provide Vermonters with a place to invest funds that would be used to grow the local economy.

Brock rejected the idea, saying lawmakers have looked at the idea and opted not to pursue it. He said most people look to invest their money with the highest rate of interest and would not be interested in investing at a lower rate at a state bank.

Brock compared a state bank, where local funds are invested and used as capital in the local economy, to sanctions the U.S. uses "when we're mad at a country" that forces them to buy local. "That's a prescription for poverty. It's not a prescription for prosperity," Brock said.

Brock has been a strong opponent of a single-payer health care plan sought by Shumlin, criticizing the governor because the cost and how it will be paid for has yet to be revealed. Instead, Brock said he favors a market-based health care system, but admitted that currently "the market doesn't work" and "there's no question that we need to repair things."

He called for tort reform and better standards of care. Doctors are performing too many medically unnecessary tests, he said, because of "the belief that they need to dot every I and cross every T to reduce the threat of litigation." "It's not the actual (law) suit. It's the idea, the threat, the exposure," he said.

Brock and Smith disagreed on the potential siting of new Air Force planes at the Vermont Air National Guard base in South Burlington. Smith said the military's own impact study indicates that about 3,000 homes "would be uninhabitable." She said "there's nothing that's denigrating to the Air National Guard" in questioning the wisdom of allowing the jets into a residential area. "Why are we trying to site a stealth bomber, not a fighter jet, in Vermont?" Smith said.

But Brock said nearby residents would be impacted only about six minutes a day, four days a week. And, the air base creates hundreds of millions of dollars in value in jobs and business activity in the Burlington area.

"This is not a 'not in my backyard' issue, as far as I'm concerned. To be host to something that is protecting our country is an honor, not a chore," Brock said.