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Attorney general candidates debate key issues

Wednesday, Oct 11, 2006

By Rob Moritz
Arkansas News Bureau

CONWAY - The candidates for state attorney general debated a variety of issues Tuesday, including the state's role in addressing illegal immigration.

The hour-long debate among Republican Gunner DeLay, Democrat Dustin McDaniel and Green Party candidate Rebekah Kennedy, was aired on the Arkansas Educational Television Network.

"People are growing more and more frustrated with our federal government because of a lack of action," DeLay, a former state senator from Fort Smith, said when asked about illegal immigration.

He urged the implementation of a program, approved during the 2005 legislative session, to train state police officers in enforcing federal immigration laws. He also said he would use the attorney general's Medicaid Fraud unit to "go after employers that knowingly hire illegals."

DeLay also said he would like to create an international fugitive data base which would include individuals that have committed a crime in Arkansas and escaped justice by fleeing across our border.

McDaniel, who is finishing his first term in the House, said current federal immigration laws are flawed and said attorney generals from across the United States should lobby the federal government to improve the federal presence in each state.

Frequently, local police and sheriff's deputies arrest illegal immigrants but end up turning them loose because there are no federal agents available, he said.

"It's a catch and release program and it's wrong," he said.

The Jonesboro resident said he would support legislation that would require all state entities and their contractors to use the Basic Pilot Employment Verification Program through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to verify the employment eligibility of perspective new hires.

"We should have tougher penalties for employers who knowingly hire, or negligently hire, illegal aliens," he said.

McDaniel questioned Delay's proposal to create a fugitive database. He said the databases that the attorney general's office now uses do exactly what Delay's new database would do.

Kennedy, of Fort Smith, said the federal government needs to reform its immigration laws and warned that training state police officers in immigration law "makes every undocumented worker in Arkansas afraid to go to the police if they are a victim of a crime."

During Monday's debate, the three candidates each said they would support legislation limiting payday lenders from charging interest rates beyond the constitutional limit.

Delay noted that McDaniel has taken donations from payday lending companies. McDaniel responded that the donations amounted to less than "one-tenth of 1 percent" of the total he has accumulated for his campaign.

"No contribution from anyone" would affect his decision-making as attorney general, McDaniel said.

Kennedy noted that DeLay voted for the original payday lending law when he was in the Senate. DeLay said he voted for the legislation because he felt payday lending institutions needed to be regulated. He said they are necessary because some people have no credit, or poor credit, and can't get small loans from banks.

He said the mistake he made was supporting the bill that classified the amount of money payday lenders can charge for loans as a fee, rather than as interest.

All three candidates said they would oppose further limits on awards in civil claims against nursing homes. Kennedy also said she would work to repeal the state's Civil Justice Reform Act of 2003, which set caps for damages in civil cases.

DeLay also talked about his plan to create a special unit within the attorney general's office to fight public corruption. Kennedy and McDaniel said creating such a unit would probably require a constitutional amendment.

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