



Our View -- Debates will help voters decide

The Free Press

— Political debates and town hall meetings don't generally draw large crowds. But maybe this year will be different.

We hesitate to say that this is an especially important election year. They're all important. And there is so much at stake in the election of 2006, with the balance of power in Washington up for grabs and leadership in the Minnesota statehouse also in voters' hands. The debate season is now upon us, and it would be well worth it for area voters to try to attend one or two local events.

At 7 p.m. Oct. 3 in the Minnesota River Room of the Mankato City Council chambers, state House and Senate candidates will meet in a debate sponsored by the cities of Mankato and North Mankato, and also Mankato Area Public Schools. The discussion will be of special interest to local voters, as it will be peppered with questions regarding Local Government Aid, transportation and other issues specific to city government. It will be taped for public access TV.

Another debate between local House and Senate candidates sponsored by the Greater Mankato Chamber of Commerce and is scheduled for 7:30 a.m. Oct. 12 at the Midwest Wireless Civic Center. The St. Peter Chamber of Commerce is co-sponsoring a forum with the League of Women Voters at 7 p.m. Oct. 17 in the chamber's Government Room. District 23 Senate and District 23A House candidates will sound off on election themes from a pre-written list of questions.

A relatively new organization called Debate Minnesota, which made a significant impact on the Minnesota debate scene in 2004, is back again with 15 debates scheduled throughout the state. Among them: a Minnesota District 23 Senate debate between Mark Piepho and Kathy Sheran at 7 p.m. Oct. 5 at Meyer Hall Auditorium, Bethany Lutheran College, Mankato; and a 7 p.m. Oct. 19 matchup of U.S. House candidates Gil Gutknecht and Tim Walz at the same location.

We applaud all local and state organizations sponsoring debates. It is crucial that Minnesota voters gain information about candidates that go beyond campaign appearances and TV and radio advertisements. Seeing candidates firsthand in a debate setting can reveal much about the candidates' philosophies, their people skills, and how they are likely to respond under pressure.

The League of Women Voters has enjoyed a well-earned reputation for public service in this regard, and Debate Minnesota is another public-minded group headed in the same direction. The group was formed to promote civility in politics through fair and open candidate forums. The foundation stresses civilized discourse, and its moderators are schooled in steering candidates clear of anything that might confuse or frustrate audiences. The famous Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 still serve as the inspiration for Debate Minnesota, which lists among its board of directors Al Quie, David Durenberger and Hubert H. Humphrey III.

Civility in politics. What a refreshing idea — and one that is especially needed today.

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