

Hutchinson on the offensive at U of M debate

Sep 27, 2006 -- 11:59 PM CDT

Craig Cox

In what was probably the last public candidate forum before the November 7 election, Independence Party candidate Peter Hutchinson took the offensive at Wednesday's gubernatorial debate with DFLer Mike Hatch and Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty at the Ted Mann Concert Hall on the University of Minnesota's Minneapolis campus.

Calling the race "an election about leadership," the former Minneapolis schools superintendent repeatedly criticized Pawlenty and Hatch for "ducking" the problems facing the state in the areas of education and transportation.

"You've got to focus to get things done," Hutchinson said, noting that the two major parties have been wasting time and energy haggling over the "seven G's"— guns, god, gay marriage, gynecology, gambling, green cards, and stadium sordidators— instead of paying attention to the issues that really affect the lives of Minnesotans.

On the state's eroding transportation infrastructure, Hutchinson took Pawlenty to task for refusing to support an increase in the gas tax and for bungling the Crosstown project. "We're on a path to disaster," he said. "If we believed in accountability we would fire the commissioner of transportation."

Hutchinson also criticized Hatch for failing to come up with a plan to address the transportation issue beyond his support for a dedicated Motor Vehicle Sales Tax that would pump an estimated \$300 million a year into the state's transportation budget. That figure, he said, "would do about one-fifth of the job."

The real solution would come from a 10-cent-per-gallon increase in the gasoline tax, Hutchinson said.

On the education front, Hutchinson derided the federal No Child Left Behind Act and stressed the need for more state funding for early childhood education, all-day kindergarten programs, and financial aid for college students. These investments, which he said would total about \$400 million a year, would be made possible by a comprehensive plan to rein in health care costs statewide, which he said drives up the cost of education.

Pawlenty acknowledged the "civil and respectful differences" between he and his opponents, who he affectionately referred to as Mike and Peter Hutchinson. But he and Hatch devoted most of the evening to sparring for each other, with Hatch accusing the governor of cutting education two years ago in a way that "destroys hope" and Pawlenty repeatedly suggesting that the attorney general was playing fast and loose with the facts and withholding the costs of his proposed program. "He's made an enormous amount of promises," Pawlenty said.

At several points during the hour-long debate, the two jabbed at one another over Hatch's position on the 2002 budget, with Pawlenty claiming his opponent supported as many as 13 different tax increases to balance the budget. Hatch repeatedly denied the allegation, attempting to clarify his position, with little success. Finally, with the two of them trading charges instead of answering questions, Hutchinson smiled broadly and raised his arms as if to negotiate a truce.

Hatch focused on his reputation as one who has "stood up for the little guy," passionately declaring his commitment to rebuilding what he described as the state's eroding middle class, and taking on the HMOs. "I'm not swayed by popularity," he said.

But he declined to explain where he would find the revenue for his transportation agenda, explaining that he was "not going to talk about revenue until I build trust" between metro and outstate motorists.

For his part, Pawlenty stayed on the defensive most of the evening, touting what he called "historic investments in education and transportation" despite the challenges of a post-9/11 economy. "Minnesota is a great state," he said. "We're doing pretty well, and we've got more to do."

He defended his transportation agenda, saying he faced a 20-year backlog in transportation projects and chiding his critics for "wanting Pawlenty to fix it in 36 months."

And, with the state's budget crisis under control, the governor claimed that there would be further investment in education, coupled with a demand for more accountability. "We're leading the nation in education reform," he said.

But there will likely be no further voter education before Minnesotans go to the polls, as neither Hatch nor Pawlenty would answer Hutchinson's challenge to debate three more times before the election.