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Tough choices on view as 3 rivals debate

BY BILL SALISBURY
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Candidates usually try to avoid telling voters unpleasant truths, but when the three major candidates for Minnesota governor were pressed Wednesday night to talk about hard choices they would make, they ventured onto some new ground.

During a debate at the University of Minnesota, Independence Party candidate Peter Hutchinson said he's willing to tell citizens that they've got to do more to make society work.

"It's not government or personal responsibility; it's both," he said.

Minnesota's health care system won't work if citizens lead unhealthy lives, he said. Traffic congestion won't get better and lakes won't be clean unless people drive smarter and stop polluting. Schools can't teach unless parents help their children learn.

"Leaders have got to be willing to say to us, 'I can make government work better, but you've got to do your part,' " he said.

Republican Gov. Tim Pawlenty said he's willing to tell Minnesotans the hard truths about the changes they must make to compete in the "massive, profound economic transformation that is sweeping the globe..."

He also called for cracking down on parents whose children drop out of school.

"The number one correlation of how kids are going to do is their parents, and there are some parents who can't, won't, refuse, don't, decline, whatever," he said. "We need to step in and help, but we also need to have a very hard discussion ... and say as a society, not just from government, but from community leaders, faith leaders, neighborhood leaders and nonprofit leaders we need to have a call to another level of parenting responsibility.

"We have way too many kids who have parents who are checked out or, worse yet, abusive, neglectful or problematic," he said. "We need a cultural statement that that's not OK."

Democratic Attorney General Mike Hatch said he's demonstrated his willingness to take tough stands. "I've stood up for the little guy, even when it was unpopular. If I think there's an injustice, I stand up. As governor, I will do the same."

Hatch said his main mission would be to rebuild the eroding middle class. "I will fight to the death to make sure we build that. Everything I do will be dedicated to that," he said.

More than 700 people — mostly partisans wearing their candidate's T-shirts and buttons — packed into the University's Ted Mann Concert Hall to hear the debate, sponsored by Debate Minnesota, a nonprofit foundation led by a multipartisan board of directors and dedicated to promoting civility in politics. The candidates were civil throughout the forum, but the crowd interrupted them frequently with cheers and applause.

The candidates also rehashed previous arguments about their education and transportation policies, breaking no new ground on those issues.

As in their two previous debates, Hatch and Hutchinson spent much of the evening criticizing Pawlenty's record, and the governor responded with a litany of his administration's accomplishments and Minnesota's high rankings in a variety of spheres.

Pawlenty delivered the best laugh line of the night when he said he often jokingly refers to his opponents at the "Hatchinson brothers."

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