

Candidates for Congress, Attorney General debate at Wesleyan College – 4/3

By Scott Finn

Studio lead: With all the attention being paid to the presidential race, it's easy to overlook some of the other primary races this year. Three Democrats are vying to take on Republican Congresswoman Shelley Moore Capito, who represents an area that includes the Kanawha Valley, parts of central West Virginia, and the Eastern Panhandle.

Meanwhile, two Republicans are trying to unset Democratic Attorney General Darrell McGraw. They all met in Buckhannon last night for a debate sponsored by the Young Democrats and Young Republicans at Wesleyan College. Scott Finn reports.

Finn: About 100 people attended the debate, which was mostly civil. The closest thing to a zinger came from former South Charleston Mayor Richie Robb, who took Barth to task for missing an editorial board meeting of the Charleston Daily Mail.

Robb: I attended that debate. Mr. Cooper attended that debate. Ms. Barth did not attend the debate. She should have been there. That's a newspaper that would ask the tough, piercing questions that any candidate taking on Shelley Moore Capito has to put forward.

Barth: I just wanted to say I had a previous engagement the day of the Daily Mail editorial board, but I did provide answers to all their questions before the day was over.

Finn: By the way, that previous engagement was a fundraiser in Fairmont sponsored by Congressman Alan Mollohan.

The candidates agreed on most issues. For example, they all called for a speedy withdrawal from Iraq. But they had different takes on illegal immigration. First you'll hear Barth, followed by Cooper and Robb.

Barth: This administration has dropped the ball on workplace enforcement. So first, we have to start enforcing the law. Second, we are a nation of immigrants, but more importantly, we are a nation of laws. They need to respect the process and be here legally, and if not, they should go home and apply to come back legally.

Cooper: As for the people who are here illegally, it took a long time for them all to come here, and it's going to take a long time for them all to go back. But we should start, among other things, besides whether a fence needs to be built between Mexico and the American border, we need strong enforcement in the workplace.

Robb: Thornton's mention of the fence was interesting. I heard the story the other day, the governor of Arizona, you show me a 50-foot fence, and I'll show you a 51-foot ladder. So I'm not sure the fence solution works. And it seems like we want to start punishing people when we were letting them come into this country. That's almost like punishing folks in this room for jaywalking. I just don't think that's right. If they're paying taxes, if they're working, if they're contributing to America, by gosh, let's keep them in here.

Finn: Another hot topic was free trade and outsourcing. Again, you'll hear Barth followed by Cooper and Robb.

Barth: The other thing we can do as a government is support trade remedies like the Byrd Amendment. It required that duties on illegal imports be paid directly to the industries harmed, like steel. And in 2006, the Republicans in Congress voted to repeal the Byrd Amendment, over the objections of the entire Democratic delegation of West Virginia.

Cooper: We have to figure out what we do best in this country. There are some types of commodities that come in and some jobs, they're not coming back. Like textiles, the clothes that most of you guys wear are made in other countries. Those jobs are not coming back.

Robb: What I think should be done, and this is very difficult, I think products should be looked at individually with respect to whether there is indeed fair trade, or whether slave labor, or polluting industries, or whether child labor is being dumped in the United States.

Finn: At the end of the day, Democrats have one overriding question – who can actually beat Shelley Moore Capito, who has beaten back competitor after competitor for the past eight years. Barth says her experience running Senator Byrd's office in West Virginia gives her the edge.

Barth: People often say that Congresswoman Capito is a nice person, and that's true. But her policies are bad for our families. She came in with George Bush seven years ago and voted with him four out of five times. Cozying up to George Bush and Dick Cheney may have worked as a strategy to help her own political career, but it has been a terrible strategy for helping West Virginians.

Finn: Cooper says his ideas and experience as a lawyer for the Public Service Commission make him the best suited...

Cooper: All three of us will probably maintain a vigorous challenge against her. It will be an uphill battle. Money is not going to do it, because if money was going to do it, Jim Humphreys would have been elected in 2000 and 2002 because he spent literally millions of dollars. To beat her, you have to have good ideas, and you have to be able to relate to the average person in the state.

Finn: And Robb touts his long tenure as mayor of South Charleston – and a fighting spirit.

Robb: Shelley Moore Capito is a very capable politician. But I think it behooves as citizen of this district to truly bring that Democratic process out, and that means a confrontation, that means challenging on the issues, and in the course of this campaign, I have shown I can do that.

Finn: Democratic Attorney General Darrell McGraw is another politician who's survived several attempts on his political career. But Republicans Hiram Lewis and Dan Greear say they have what it takes to take McGraw out.

Greear is a South Charleston lawyer who served for one term in the House of Delegates.

Greear: As a lawyer, when you represent a client and get a settlement or recovery in a case, the money goes to your client. That's not how the Attorney General practices for the state of West Virginia. The OxyContin lawsuit against Pro-Pharma, the best example, received a \$10 million settlement on behalf of three clients, DHHR, Workers' Comp and PEIA. Those three agencies didn't get a single penny of that settlement. That is not representing your client.

Finn: Lewis is a Morgantown lawyer who came within about 5,000 votes of upsetting McGraw in 2004.

Lewis: He has abused his spending and hiring practices to the point where companies are afraid to come to West Virginia to supply the jobs that we need that is better for everyone.

Finn: Greear has received the lion's share of endorsements from his fellow Republicans – something that Lewis shrugged off, but Greear embraced.

Lewis: You know, there's some people that I would have to turn down that's on that list, and I wouldn't want their endorsement, so you've got that problem, also.

Greear: To have the support of 24 Republican legislators, past and current, which quite frankly, I'm quite proud of each and every one of them, to have their support.

Finn: Lewis couched his candidacy in terms of a crusade to make the state more business-friendly.

Lewis: If you elect me as your Attorney General I will stop the practices that have created the unfair legal climate in this state. I will turn this state around with your help in the time that I'm in office, to better the economy, to let outside interests know that we are open for business.

Finn: Meanwhile, Greear says he has the experience in politics and running a successful law firm to convince voters he can do the job.

Greear: I think one of the reasons as Republicans we haven't been successful in defeating Darryl McGraw yet, and we've come close three times, but I honestly think one reason we haven't is, we haven't done a good job of giving people a good reason to vote for us. It's not enough to run against Darrell McGraw and say, vote for me, I'm not Darrell McGraw. That's not enough. We need to present the picture that we're able to do that job and why we're able to do that job.

Finn: West Virginia's primary election is scheduled for Tuesday, May 13th.
For West Virginia Public Broadcasting, I'm Scott Finn in Charleston.