

Candidates debate strategies to bridge budget gap

By [Rudi Keller](#)

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Rep. Chris Kelly last night called opponent Laura Nauser “intellectually empty” for suggesting that higher education spending could be spared during budget cuts. Nauser replied that “nothing is impossible.”

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During a legislative forum on the University of Missouri campus, budget issues were a main topic. The forum, sponsored by the American Association of University Professors and three student groups, included candidates from four Boone County legislative districts but not every candidate.

All the Democratic candidates took part. Nauser, a Columbia city councilwoman running on the Republican ticket in the 24th District, was the only Republican to attend.

In the coming budget year, the state must plug a budget hole estimated at \$400 million. The state is spending the last of the federal dollars allocated to state budget needs, and state revenues have not grown, leaving the gap.

“We need to evaluate all the things the state does,” Nauser said.

Kelly, D-Columbia, is a member of the House Budget Committee and a former chairman of that committee. He is pushing to put a cigarette tax on the ballot to support education programs and building projects.

The budget has been cut so severely in past years, he said, that budget cuts won’t work to fill the gap.

“To contend we can find enough money in the budget to do anything significant for higher education is intellectually empty,” Kelly said. “There is not the money there.”

“I would not say I am intellectually empty,” Nauser replied. “We can go back through our budget. Government does not have the right to grow.”

Later, after more discussion of the budget, Nauser noted that the city council had cut its own food budget to help out with a city budget shortfall. “Nothing is impossible,” she said. “Nothing is easy.”

Nauser said she opposes any tax increase, including one on cigarettes.

Other candidates on the podium also warned that major budget cuts were coming and that higher education would be a target. “You cannot say, ‘I don’t believe in increasing revenue’ and not cut higher education,” said Rep. Stephen Webber, D-Columbia.

Webber faces Republican Paul Szopa in the 25th House District. Szopa could not attend because of family

commitments.

Kelly Schultz, a Democrat seeking the 21st District seat, said there aren't enough places to cut to find money to protect higher education.

Departments with earmarked funding are off-limits, she said, and the major spending programs are public schools, higher education and social services. All will be in danger of budget cuts, she said.

Kelly's opponent, Republican John Cauthorn, did not attend. No reason was given during the forum.

Rep. Mary Still, who is unopposed in the 25th House District, said she supports putting a cigarette tax on the ballot and endorsing an interstate compact on sales tax that could bring \$300 million to the state.

Nausier and Kelly agreed that lawmakers should support a state bond issue to construct new higher-education buildings across the state. They also agreed that the state should consider replacing the income tax with an expanded sales tax that covers services as well as products.

"Taxing consumption rather than production will provide a more vibrant economy," Kelly said.

"Chris, you are starting to sound like a Republican," Nausier said. "To make it work, there cannot be any exemptions."

Reach Rudi Keller at 573-815-1709 or e-mail rkeller@columbiatribune.com.

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