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Barrett pledges special session on collective bargaining, Falk says not enough

MILWAUKEE -- Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett vowed Thursday to call a special session of the Legislature to restore collective rights for public employees if he's elected gov.

But former Dane County Exec Kathleen Falk countered at a forum hosted by unions and progressive groups that such a move was not enough and again pledged to use the budget to restore those powers.

"You've got to be serious about restoring it, and it's not enough to introduce a bill. It's not enough to call a special session because the Legislature doesn't have to come," said Falk, who has been endorsed by several public employee unions. "There is only one bill that has to pass, and that's the budget bill, and that's the way to do it, and that's what I'm committed to doing."

Thursday's forum in Serb Hall was hosted by 41 unions and progressive groups and was the first give-and-take between the four Dem gov candidates since Barrett announced Friday he was getting into the race. All four also spoke to a group of Milwaukee-area Dems on Saturday in separate speeches.

The forum was also held as some public employee unions have started ramping up their attacks on Barrett, charging he has not been a strong enough advocate against Gov. Scott Walker's collective bargaining changes.

Barrett said emphatically that he "will work and fight to restore collective bargaining in this state."

"I am prepared, as the next governor of this state, to call a special session to restore collective bargaining rights for public employees in the state of Wisconsin," Barrett said. "I would be honored to do that, and we would get that bill passed through the Senate, I know we would, and we would put so much pressure on the Assembly that they'd be quaking in their boots and they would have to pass that legislation. That's not a lie."

The candidates were asked to give brief opening and closing comments and to respond to a series of questions by audience members.

The forum was largely a polite one, with candidates focusing their criticism on Walker and not debating each other.

All of the candidates said they'd support restore funding to education, public transit, infrastructure repairs and Badger Care. They all said they supported benefits for domestic partners and allowing at least some undocumented immigrants to pay in-state college tuition.

Barrett and state Sen. Kathleen Vinehout, D-Alma, said immigrants who have attended high school in Wisconsin should qualify for in-state tuition.

All said they'd raise taxes on the wealthiest citizens to help pay for the programs they support.

"When I was in Congress, we raised the tax rate on the wealthiest people in this country," Barrett said. "We did so and that led to the largest economic expansion in the history of this country. That's what happened under Bill Clinton. We had a balanced budget for the only time in a generation. We made the wealthy pay."

Barrett said Walker will instead lower the taxes on the wealthiest people of the state if he gets the opportunity.

Secretary of State Doug La Follette suggested, "Tax the 1 percent a lot more, get the money and then you invest that in public structures. Our infrastructure is falling apart, whether it's bridges or schools or water treatment plants. And

we might even build a train between Milwaukee and Madison.”

Falk and Barrett differed somewhat when asked by a single mother if they would enact a statewide paid sick day policy.

“I’m eager to learn more about a paid sick day policy,” Falk said. “I can tell you what I’ve done as a county executive. When I was elected 14 years ago, I made sure we passed an ordinance to require we paid a living wage.”

But Barrett said a sick day policy would only work at the national level.

“Then you can start bringing it to the state level and then you can ensure that you don’t have companies that leave,” Barrett said. “I’ve got to be honest with you, when we had that debate at the local level, I had employers call me and say, ‘This will cause us to move jobs out of this city.’”

Barrett opposed a city paid sick leave ordinance voters approved via referendum, arguing it put Milwaukee at a competitive disadvantage and should be handled on a state or federal level. The ordinance was eventually overturned by the courts.

Vinehout said she has put together an alternative state budget that finds a way to pay health care, education and other causes without requiring more tax revenue. She called Walker’s budget “fishy.”

“He’s got \$2 billion in new money and he says we’re broke. We’re not broke,” Vinehout said. “What he did was cut funds to local government, which means local government can’t fix the sewer and the roads. The problem with the budget is not that there isn’t enough money, it’s that they’re spending it in the wrong places.”

La Follette drew the biggest laughs of the night when he gave a personal example of why he supported Planned Parenthood, which provides services such as birth control and STD screenings for women.

“Planned Parenthood, I’m a strong supporter of that, I have been for years. My health insurance funded my vasectomy,” he said. He started to say, “and they should fund...,” but his sentence was drowned by peals of laughter and applause. “Hey, we let it all hang out here,” he said to more laughter.

The four Dems also were also joined in the forum by Michael Mangan, who said he plans to run for governor as a “Lincoln Republican.” Mangan, who described himself as a certified energy engineer, a former teamster, former school board member and former school employee in the Kiel School District, insisted he is not a fake Republican, but rather a liberal Republican in the tradition of Abraham Lincoln.

Mangan supported nearly all of the Democrats’ stands on issues. But he said he has mixed views toward unions, based on his experience as a teamster member. He said his union disappointed him by protecting “deadwood” instead of younger, hard-working employees.

-- *By Kay Nolan*

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