

Democratic candidates for 17th District debate in Pottsville

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Dow Ford speaks during the debate.

Other than health care reform, the Democratic candidates for the 17th Congressional District agreed on most things Monday evening during a debate hosted by The Republican-Herald and the Orwigsburg Free Public Library at the Sovereign Majestic Theater in Pottsville.

Harrisburg attorney Sheila Dow Ford slammed U.S. Rep Holden, D-17, for voting against health care reform legislation, calling it a lack of leadership.

Holden defended his position on the health care bill and pointed to the benefits his district has enjoyed because of his seniority on the House transportation and agricultural committees.

Dow Ford is trying to take the Democratic nomination for the district away from 18-year incumbent Holden in the May 18 Primary Election. The 17th District includes Schuylkill, Lebanon and Dauphin counties and parts of Perry and Berks counties.

Questions put to the candidate were based on those submitted by readers of The Republican-Herald and republicanherald.com. Republican-Herald reporters Ben Wolfgang and Dustin Pangonis asked the questions, which were displayed on a PowerPoint presentation behind the candidates.

Monday's debate was open to the public and admission was free. Tickets were distributed by lottery and more than 180 people attended the event, which lasted an hour and 10 minutes.



Holden speaks during the debate.

17th District Democratic debate video

What is your position on health care reform and why?

"I believe that bill was robbing Peter to pay Paul," Holden, who voted against health care reform, said.

He said the bill cuts Medicaid services and he has been informed it will still boost the cost of Medicaid by \$350 million. Moreover, the reform bill imposes taxes on current insurance plans, something he said organized labor asked him to oppose.

Holden said he believed there was a definite need for reform but it should have been done incrementally, citing outlawing discrimination on the basis of a previous condition, closing the Medicare doughnut hole for senior citizens and allowing the sale of insurance of across state lines.

Dow Ford said organized labor actually asked Holden to support the bill.

"I would have voted for that bill," she said. "Do I think it was perfect? No, but I think it was a good start. That bill was 40 years in the making."

She criticized Holden for missing the call of history and not showing leadership. As an example of the reform's benefits, she referred to a 70-year-old woman from the district who previously had to go back to work to pay for her prescription medicine, but because of the reform, the woman will now "get a check in the mail" to cover her prescriptions.

What steps will you take to fight unemployment in the 17th District?

Dow Ford said that of all of Pennsylvania's Congressional Districts, the 17th has been hardest hit in job losses over the last few decades.

She said she believes the Federal Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 has done much to help depressed areas, but more needs to be done.

"We need to look at trade policy," she said. "We import too much."

Referring to the building of distribution centers across the region, she said, "We need to send something back" to balance trade.

She said more investment is needed in manufacturing, infrastructure and green technology.

Holden is also a believer in infrastructure jobs, highways and transportation, which he said his seniority in Congress has helped gain for the state through federal spending.

He pointed out that, should he be re-elected, he will still be on the House Transportation Committee as it prepares the next highway bill.

"I will be in the room when they write that bill," he said. The bill could be in excess of \$9 billion and through his influence, he would see that it brought "thousands and thousands of jobs to Pennsylvania."

Do you believe the welfare system needs to be restructured?

"The federal government has a responsibility to give people an opportunity to lift someone up," Holden said.

He said that means job training and "the tools to get back on their feet in this economy."

Holden said he was glad to vote for welfare reform under President Bill Clinton.

"Here's the problem," Dow Ford said. "Yes, he did sign the Welfare Reform Act ... But there has been significant slippage since then. More people are on welfare than in many, many years."

She blamed this on a disconnect between education and job training, and the work that is available. As an example, she said the president of the United Steel Workers union told her recently that he had trouble fulfilling a request for 20 welders.

What role do you think the federal government should play in education?

"Some say local control is sacrosanct," Dow Ford said. However, although she believes local control is important, since the federal government is spending an ever larger amount on education, she believes the role of the national government is therefore greater as well.

"What we need is a national set of standards in science, math, English, because we need to have a well-educated workforce."

She called for more initiatives that are "well-funded and well-managed that make the connection between inputs and outputs."



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Holden said "the federal government has a responsibility to make a significant contribution to education.

However, it should not "micro-manage it."

He said President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind initiative has been a failure that forces teachers to "teach to the test" while the federal government has not paid out the money it promised in imposing the regulations.

Holden also stressed the need for a well-educated workforce for the nation to compete on a global scale.

To what extent should the government support energy projects such as wind and clean coal?

Holden called for a "multi-pronged" attack on the nation's energy problems, including the development of solar and wind power as well as domestic oil supplies and the drilling for gas in the Marcellus Shale.

Moreover, "We have more recoverable coal in this country than the world has recoverable oil." Holden said if the technology exists to put a man on the moon, then it must be possible to sequester carbon, a process needed to make the use of coal cleaner.

Holden reminded the audience of his efforts to procure federal funding for a coal-to-gas plant in Schuylkill County and blamed bureaucrats in the Bush and Obama administrations for holding up the project.

Dow Ford said she agrees with Holden on alternate energy but she faulted him for the failure of Schuylkill County industrialist John W. Rich Jr. plans to build a coal to oil plant in the county to materialize. She said in spite of all the tax money that was allocated for "The Rich Debacle" to bring thousands of jobs to the area "That contract has gone now ... and it's not coming back."

She also called for an extraction tax on gas drilling in the Marcellus Shale and called it "shameful" that many of the people employed in the new industry are not from the state.

What is your position on global warming?

Dow Ford believes global warming "is a serious concern for the United States." She said she would support cap and trade measures in Congress.

She said that the U.S. needs to be a leader in protecting the environment because "America is just one portion of the globe" and has had 100 years to develop like Third World countries are doing now.

Holden did not vote for cap and trade "because it would have been devastating to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and to Schuylkill County."

He said that such measures would put the U.S. at a disadvantage and that, on a recent trip to India, a developing country, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton was told "forget it" regarding restrictions on carbon emissions, Holden said.

What is your position on immigration law and enforcement?

"If it is illegal, it is illegal," Holden said. "If someone is here illegally, they should be detained and deported."

Holden said he has voted for stronger border control as a Congressman and hounded immigration authorities for a month until they raided the construction site of a Wal-Mart Distribution Center in Highridge Business Park near

Gordon, where in November 2005, 120 illegal immigrants were arrested.

He said he wants stronger enforcement of existing laws, no amnesty for violators and stronger border security.

Dow Ford said she agreed with Holden and called illegal immigration a threat to American jobs and homeland security but said, "We need to be reasonable."

The one exception she made for strict enforcement is for illegal immigrants who have been in the country for "generations." During his closing statement, Holden pointed out this is a factual error as anyone born on U.S. soil gains citizenship.

Dow Ford also said she wants to companies to be held accountable.

"Too often we turn a blind eye to those companies that have decided they need cheap labor," she said.

Do you support military engagement to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons?

Both candidates said they supported the use of military force against the spread nuclear arms, referred to Iran as a threat and Israel as a valuable ally and bastion of democracy in the Middle East.

The candidates were also asked about Afghanistan. Holden said the Afghanistan issue might have been more quickly solved if the same effort had been applied to it as had been to Iraq. Dow Ford said the Afghanistan-Pakistan border is the place where efforts need to be focused.

When asked about term limits, both candidates said term limits already exist because incumbents must be re-elected.

Holden has faced no primary challenges since he ran for Congress in 1992. From 1994 to 2007, Dow Ford was senior vice president and chief counsel to the Pennsylvania Higher Education Assistance Agency. In 2007, she started Dow/Ford Strategies, a public policy consulting firm.

Holden was Schuylkill County sheriff from 1985 to 1993, before which he was a sergeant-at-arms and a probation officer. In 2002, he confounded political wisdom after his district was redrawn to favor the GOP. Holden ousted long-time Republican incumbent George Gekas due in part to his support in Schuylkill County.

Holden is a member of the conservative Blue Dog Democrats coalition. Dow Ford has taken issue with Holden's conservatism.

Meanwhile, this year, a Holden supporter challenged Dow Ford's ballot petitions in court but lost.

Republican-Herald Editor Pete Banko moderated Monday's debate following an introduction by Publisher Henry Nyce.

On Wednesday, four Republican candidates for their party's nomination will debate at 7 p.m. at the same location.

The General Election will be Nov. 2.

Click [here](#) for videos of the debate and more election coverage.