

## Press Release – 22 September 2020

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The Hutchinson Chamber of Commerce hosted a forum on Tuesday evening, Sept. 22 with Kansas House District Representative candidates in districts 101 and 114. The event was held at the Community Center in S. Hutchinson.

Jeff Stroberg-D and Michael Murphy-R are the candidates running in District 114, which includes Sterling, Nickerson, South Hutchinson, Sylvia, Turon, Kingman and areas surrounding these towns.

In opening statements, Stroberg said he had grown up in Kansas. Murphy moved to the state in the 1990's.

Stroberg, a retired certified public accountant, said he was running for House Representative to “advocate for all of southcentral Kansas.”

Murphy said he was a retired airline pilot who now farms and writes for magazines. He authored a book titled, “Spare Time” in 2012.

Candidates were asked eight questions during the forum. Each had a minute to respond and a half-minute to rebut their opponent's response when they were the first to speak on a topic.

On COVID-19, Murphy said decisions about combating the virus “wouldn't be up to [him].” He said he and his wife had planned a trip in March that had to be canceled. After waiting two weeks, he said they felt more comfortable, but did not say if he had taken the trip. He said states that did not lock down early in the crisis had a “death rate the same as ours.

Stroberg said Kansans should be careful about how they compare statistics. One of the eight states that did not lockdown (North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Wyoming and Utah) had actually had higher death rates than Kansas. “South Dakota has had more deaths per capita than we had,” he said.

When asked about state finances, Stroberg said the legislature needed to wisely invest in infrastructure. He said there has been a rural migration of people moving away from Kansas the past 20 years, under a Republican-controlled State House and Senate and that the state's economy had suffered under the COVID virus. "I know how to bring in revenues," Stroberg said.

Murphy said COVID-19 "didn't cause anything." He said Kansas was already struggling before the virus hit. Murphy said the state had increased its budget over the past 20 years, including a five percent increase in the past five years.

Stroberg rebutted Murphy, saying 600 Kansans had died because of COVID-19.

"[The virus] does have an effect on the economy and on families," Stroberg said. He cited outbreaks at meat-packing plants in western Kansas as an example.

"These were mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts and uncles. Let's all remember that," Stroberg said to the audience's applause.

Both candidates were in favor of finding ways to help the state fair recover from its shutdown in September. The Kansas State Fair board has asked the state for funding to cover its losses after canceling the 2020 fair. Murphy suggested using funds already set aside by legislators. Stroberg said he would like to see corporate sponsorship of the fair, especially since limited liability corporations (LLC), including Koch Industries, "had paid no taxes" under former Gov. Sam Brownback.

The candidates clashed over Medicaid expansion. Chamber President Debra Teufel, who moderated the forum, said Reno County could see an influx of \$6 million into its economy and 55 new jobs added if Medicaid expansion were adopted by the legislature.

Stroberg said in District 114, including Kingman and parts of Rice Counties, could see an increase in about 120 jobs and would gain \$120 million in funding. He said Medicaid expansion was essential to keeping rural hospitals open.

"Kingman knew [keeping its hospital open] was so important that they raised their sales tax...they knew if they lost their hospital, there is very little chance any business will move into that community ...[Medicaid expansion] is what 70 percent of Kansans want," Stroberg said.

"I'm not interested in this at all," replied Murphy.

Murphy said he had gone online and found ways for people to get the healthcare they need. He provided no details, saying people should use healthcare already available and not look to government as a way to provide it.

“Money doesn’t just grow on trees,” Murphy said.

Both men agreed road construction, including the Route 96 corridor project, was good for Kansas’ economy. Stroberg said he would like to see the highway expand to Hays so that people traveling from the western part of the state to the southeast would have a direct route through District 114. Murphy added that without good roads, businesses would not be attracted to the state.

Education was the “most critical” issue to Stroberg. He said investing in education provided “the best return on our dollars.” Stroberg added he did not support free college, but did support preschool for all children, as some studies show students who receive this early education were likely to become “more productive in life.”

Stroberg added higher education in the state should be supported, as college graduates needed to be prepared, so as not to be a security risk to the nation.

“The wars of tomorrow will not be fought with bullets and bombs, but with bits, brains and bytes, Stroberg said.

Murphy said the Supreme Court “was out of line” when it forced legislators to adequately fund schools. He said the legislature determines the budget.

“If teachers need to buy supplies, it’s not the taxpayers’ fault...We need to be talking about administrators. Administration is way heavy [in some districts],” Murphy said.

In his rebuttal, Stroberg said the Supreme Court does not create the budget, but they do enforce the laws already created. He said it was former legislators who created those rules.

When it came to eliminating sales tax on groceries, the candidates agreed for the most part. Murphy suggested taxing only prepared foods, such as rotisserie chicken. Stroberg said he agreed in eliminating the tax over time as it would provide tax relief to those in “greatest need.”

“Imagine a state that in July 2019 exempted tax on gold, silver and bullion and still charges tax on food,” Stroberg said referring to Kansas.

Stroberg said the last time the state had a strategic study for economic development was in 1986. He said if Kansans agreed the state was a great place to raise children, then funding for broadband and schools needed to be properly appropriated.

Murphy said that 66 of 105 counties had seen a decline in population and an increase in property taxes over the past 20 years. He said people cannot afford to stay in Kansas. He said Kansas was the 41<sup>st</sup> state in the nation in terms of economic development.

Stroberg replied that the rural migration created over the past 20 years had happened under one party in the legislature. "Let's do something about that," he said.

In closing, Murphy said he stood firmly behind small business. He said he had a retirement plan from his career as a pilot but that after Sept. 11, 2001, he lost that plan.

*(United Airlines, Inc. amended and restated the provisions of their Pilot's Directed Account Retirement Income plan on Jan. 1, 2002. For plans ending Dec. 30, 2004, Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, a United States government agency, guaranteed four United Airlines pension plans. Pilots retiring at age 65 received between \$3,699 and \$3,329 per month with those retiring at earlier ages receiving lesser amounts by age.)*

Murphy continued saying people had to "suck it up" and do what they needed to do to get by. "We can't sit back and wait for someone in Topeka to do it," he said.

In his closing statement, Stroberg quoted Helen Keller saying, "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much." He said the legislature had been working as though they were playing between the 40-yard lines in a football game.

"Let's get things done...This is not about me; it's about you," Stroberg concluded, pointing to the audience.

To review a recording of the forum, go online to: [www.facebook.com/HutchChamber](http://www.facebook.com/HutchChamber).

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