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# 16th Legislative District Candidates Forum

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Photo by Vivienne Chen

With the addition of Princeton and South Brunswick, two historically Democratic voting blocs, into the Republican-dominated 16<sup>th</sup> district, candidates for the New Jersey State Legislature found themselves

discussing new issues at Tuesday’s forum in Princeton Township’s Municipal Court.

The debate featured two candidates for the Senate and three candidates for State Assembly. Incumbent Senator Christopher “Kip” Bateman (Republican) faced opposition from attorney Maureen Vella (Democrat), while Republican assembly candidate Jack Ciattarelli squared off against Democrats Marie Corfield and Joe Camarota. Incumbent Assemblyman Peter Biondi (Republican) could not attend the debate due to a death in the family.

Key issues that drove the debate included the recent suspension of cost-of-living-adjustments (COLA) for retired public employees, the “millionaire’s tax,” and affordable housing.

Senator Bateman, who voted for the suspension of COLA, explained his decision.

“Quite frankly, the state is broke, and we’re trying to preserve the pensions for

those who deserve it,” he said. “With the reforms that happened this year, we’re saving 120 billion dollars over the next 30 years.”

“You can’t change the rules in the middle of the game,” countered Vella, who objected to the fact that the pension bill was put in the healthcare bill, which she believed should have been split to allow unions to collectively bargain. “It’s in our Constitution.”

“Sure there’s an obligation to the Constitution,” Bateman responded. “There’s also an obligation to the taxpayers of New Jersey. If the money’s not there, what do we do?”

Senator Bateman and Vella also differed on their position on reinstating a tax on those who make more than a million dollars.

“I don’t think a millionaire’s tax will help the economy,” Bateman said. “We don’t want businesses or people to leave New Jersey, we want them to stay here and provide jobs.”

Vella, however, cited New Jersey’s 9% unemployment rate. “Where are all the jobs?” she asked. “We have 16,000 people who earn over a million dollars, each one of them is getting a 40,000-dollar tax break. We need to all share and sacrifice, not just the poor and the middle class.”

On the Assembly side of the debate, the candidates tackled the issue of affordable housing, since N.J. Governor Chris Christie abolished the Council on Affordable Housing in September.

“The Council on Affordable Housing was fraught with problems,” said Democratic candidate Corfield. “That being said, we have to make sure that our towns have the ability to provide housing for all.” Corfield emphasized fair landlord laws, fair zoning, and fair property taxes.

Democrat Camarota, who served on an affordable housing committee in South Brunswick, said, “we have to find ways to work with public and private entities that will develop affordable homes.”

“I see Affordable Housing as an economic development opportunity,” said Ciattarelli, and he reminded the forum that the elimination of the council did not overturn the Mount Laurel Supreme Court ruling that requires municipalities to provide opportunities for affordable housing. Rather, Ciattarelli said the Council’s abolishment removes bureaucratic “red tape.”

While candidates differed on these issues, most of the forum was marked by

accord. Both Senate candidates agreed that charter schools should be subject to voter approval, and the Assembly candidates all supported the Blue Acres program to buy out frequently flooded plain areas. Bateman and Vella both supported a ban on fracking—the use of high-pressure water and chemicals to break shale and release natural gas—which contaminates ground water.

Overall, the Democratic candidates seemed to emphasize their desire to work with Trenton, in hopes of appealing to the new constituents from Princeton (formerly in the 15<sup>th</sup> district with Trenton), while the Republican candidates emphasized their fiscal responsibility.

Voting for the Senate and Assembly is on November 8.

#### ***About the Author »***

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#### ***Vivienne Chen***

Vivienne Chen is a student at Princeton University majoring in English. She recently moved to Princeton from Pleasanton, California.

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