

Gubernatorial candidates debate farm issues

BY BRIAN CARLSON
Staff writer



YORK — Bill Hoppner and Mike Johanns used their first gubernatorial debate Aug. 15 to articulate their differences on farm and crime issues, while reserving their toughest criticism for an issue on which they actually agree.

Hoppner, the Democratic nominee, pressed Lincoln Mayor Johanns for a fuller public explanation of his summer flip-flop on a proposed constitutional amendment to place a lid on state and local tax revenues. Johanns, who favored the amendment during the Republican primary, signed a petition to place it on the November ballot and supported it until early July, when he changed his mind.

Hoppner, a former aide for James Exon and Bob Kerrey during their tenures as governor and U.S. senator, respectively, has opposed the amendment since supporters announced the petition effort in March.

Hoppner accused Johanns of continuing to speak in favor of the amendment even after he decided it was a bad idea. Johanns' GOP primary opponents, U.S. Rep. Jon Christensen and State Auditor John Breslow, asserted Johanns would not have won the party's nomination had he opposed the amendment during the primary.

"This is an issue that goes right to the heart of leadership," Hoppner said. "I am going to insist in the next 80 days that we discuss this."

Johanns said he changed his position on the amendment when he realized its language would prohibit the Legislature from using state budget surpluses for property tax relief.

Under the amendment, state surpluses return to taxpayers through reduced income and sales taxes, and local governments would be responsible for property tax cuts.

Johanns turned the criticism in Hoppner's direction, saying the Democrat acted too swiftly in opposing the amendment in March before the language had been drafted.

"At that time, what he was reacting to was spending discipline in state government," he said.

But Hoppner said he opposed the amendment from the start because it could hurt education and have a "devastating" effect on efforts at property-tax relief, especially for rural citizens.

The candidates outlined opposing ideas for dealing with regional farm problems, with Hoppner arguing for expanded loans for struggling farmers and Johanns defending free-market farm reforms enacted in 1996.

Low commodity prices caused by record crops and waning export demand, particularly from struggling Asian economies, are expected to depress farm incomes and put many farmers in debt this fall.

Hoppner said the farm situation already represents a "real disaster" and said the federal government must provide a safety net to protect farmers and avert a debt crisis.

"We need to advocate increasing the loan rate and extending the marketing loan so farmers can service their debt," he said. He predicted the low prices would leave a large number of farm families unable to repay their debt if no government action were taken. "I bet in

60 days my opponent will change his mind."

But Johanns said lawmakers should preserve the 1996 free-market reforms enacted in the federal legislation known as the Freedom to Farm Act.

"We had a time when people farmed and ranched not for themselves, their family and their future, but for the government. Do we really want to go back to that?" he said. "Let's get the government off the back of the farmer and rancher."

Johanns said low commodity prices expected to squeeze farmers' incomes this year were mainly attributable to decreased demand from Asia, which has suffered a yearlong economic slump.

Because 40 percent of Nebraska's agricultural exports have gone to Asia in recent years, he said, the state's next governor should advocate federal policies to increase international trade.

Specifically, he said, Nebraskans should support fast-track trade authority for the president, fewer U.S. embargoes and full funding for the International Monetary Fund as it seeks to guide the Asian economies to recovery.

Johanns also touted his endorsement by the Nebraska State Patrol, which he identified as his top spending priority. The patrol needs more funding and officers to deal with increasing felony arrests for methamphetamines

and other drug possession, he said.

But Hoppner said Johanns' support for law enforcement was inconsistent with the mayor's position in favor of permits allowing law-abiding citizens to carry concealed weapons, which Johanns reaffirmed during the debate. Hoppner said he opposes the idea because law enforcement agencies do.

"They are scared to death in terms

of what it means to our safety," Hoppner said.

But Johanns said "the bad guys are already carrying guns" and said "we should not punish law-abiding citizens."

The debate was sponsored by the Nebraska Broadcasters Association. Four more debates are scheduled, with the next one set for Sept. 6 at the Nebraska State Fair in Lincoln.

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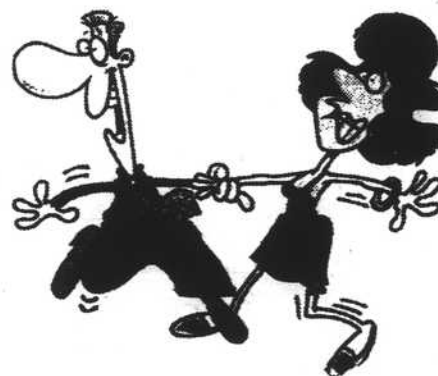
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