

CANDIDATES AND KIDS

# Debating Oregon children, but first a word about taxes

**T**hursday, in an Oregon Public Broadcasting debate that was supposed to focus on children, Democratic Gov. Ted Kulongoski and GOP challenger Ron Saxton agreed on fully funding Head Start for all qualifying Oregon kids.

In a state that just got a D- in early care and education in its annual report card from Children First for Oregon, that would seem like a good place to begin. But Kulongoski and Saxton didn't agree on much else, including how the state would get any more money for kids. So don't order the extra milk and modeling clay just yet.

In the hourlong exchange, children's questions often seemed a side issue of tax questions — which is indeed one way to talk about them, and also a way to avoid talking about them.

And often, a way to avoid doing anything about them.

Kulongoski was direct about the new revenue he wants, notably his proposal to increase the cigarette tax enough to provide health coverage for all Ore-



DAVID SARASOHN

gon kids. This isn't exactly a bold new idea. It's what you might call a creative old idea, one that has now been proposed for 20 years — while the number of uninsured Oregon kids has risen, the amount of available federal money that Oregon left on the table has gone up, and Oregon became the only state in the past few years to cut its cigarette tax.

The governor also is prepared to keep the corporate kicker to set up a rainy day fund and raise the minimum corporate income tax to help cover early childhood education. He also seemed to talk at one point about the need for a lap for every Oregon kid to climb into, but he didn't offer a fiscal plan.

Saxton, on the other hand, leaped at any mention of taxes as if one of the kids under discussion had put a tack on his chair.

"Anyone who thinks the solution is to talk about raising taxes," he declared, "is just dreaming."

His proposed solution to Oregon's 117,000 medically uncovered children is to increase jobs, which would eventually bring more family medical cover-

age — even though a diminishing number of jobs bring those kind of benefits.

In an emergency, maybe Saxton isn't the ideal figure to call you an ambulance.

This doubt persisted into his ideas of just how to improve early childhood education.

"I absolutely believe it's critical that children have the opportunity," Saxton said firmly, before insisting that it didn't have to be government's job to provide it.

The community has to step up, he suggested, because those shortcomings are how we got into this.

Five times Saxton cited the Chalkboard Project's recent proposals for efficiencies in schools, without ever touching on its assessment of the need for additional funding. In fact, he warned against thinking about any need for more school revenue.

Kulongoski's own performance was often mixed. His attack on Saxton's time at the Portland School Board was rambling and unfocused. The governor's account of what he'd done for kids during his first term — also available on a nightly basis on his 30-second television spots — was necessarily brief. It consists of an increase in the number of kids with

state health care coverage (although the number of uninsured kids also rose) and two fairly small-scale efforts.

The debate often wandered into curious places, into Saxton's arguing that Oregon's minimum wage is too high, and Kulongoski attacking Saxton as an advocate for "the privileged few."

Saxton's direct question to the governor was, of course, all about Kulongoski's overall tax policy.

To the question of what effort would help kids the most in the future, both candidates declared solemnly, "Education."

So at least the debate also ended on a note of agreement, even if it didn't extend past a single word.

It's some kind of advance, anyway, to have the leading candidates for governor debate on children's problems.

But it loses something when children are considered just a side issue of the tax question.

Only smaller.

David Sarasohn, associate editor, can be reached at 503-221-8523 or [david@sarasohn@news.oregonian.com](mailto:david@sarasohn@news.oregonian.com).