

The Morehead News: Budget surplus talks

By Kim Hamilton - News Editor 12/08/06

Broadening access to health care was first, but better funding for education and public retirement were in close second place during a public forum with the governor in Morehead last week.

The votes were a result of the number of hands raised by a group of Morehead citizens who attended Gov. Ernie Fletcher's forum on Thursday, Dec. 7, at the Morehead Conference Center.

The governor traveled to Morehead to address what he called the state's \$279 million budget surplus. Approximately 200 people attended the forum.

However, some disagreed that Fletcher could call the money a "surplus."

"I take exception to calling this \$279 million a surplus when you consider the state's chronic under funding of health care, human services, education, housing and environmental protection," said Doug Doerrfeld of Morehead, and a member of Kentuckians for the Commonwealth.

"Are you suggesting we need to raise taxes?" Fletcher asked.

"Kentucky needs tax reform to raise more revenue to adequately fund these things and move the state forward," Doerrfeld said.

The governor came to the forum with six options as priorities on which to use the money.

"It's your money and its use should be your priorities," Fletcher said. "The purpose of this meeting is for me to hear from you."

The options were:

- Return money to Kentucky families
- Save money for a rainy day
- Strengthen public retirement programs
- Broaden access to health care
- Invest money in public schools
- Make college more affordable

About three people voted for returning the money to families by reducing various income taxes.

Nobody voted for saving the money for a rainy day fund.

A few more than 70 voted for broadening health care access, but about 70 raised their hands for each suggestion of "investment in public schools," "better public retirement programs" and "making college more affordable."

Francene Botts-Butler, an attorney and Morehead State University's director of multicultural student services, told Fletcher that he should have put the suggestions regarding education together to keep from separating the votes.

Another audience member said it is difficult to choose between health care and education, because both are vital to public welfare.

Fletcher replied that these topics are tough and many times moral decisions that public officials must deal with when elected to office.

Robbie Rudolph, the governor's secretary of all the cabinets, said the administration has been able to take care of a state deficit without raising taxes.

"We have cut and changed programs and now have a surplus," Rudolph said.

More than \$107 million has been funded to Rowan County during the Fletcher administration, according to a fact sheet that was supplied to the audience prior to the forum.

Fletcher has filed to run for office again in 2007.